# The Imagination

a tour of Western poetics in a series of brief sketches

by

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cover image by Bridget Underdahl


This is the "summer" panel from Bridget's "I'm Still. Here." seasonal series that also provided the cover image for my "winter" book, *A Mind of Winter*, from which these inter-chapters have been extracted and revised. The "spring" panel is the cover for the other half of that book, the personal essays now revised and gathered in *Spring Forward*. I'm saving the "fall" panel for something special I haven't yet imagined

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## Contents

# Preface

*To whom then am I addressed ? To the Imagination.*

William Carlos Williams

This book is a compilation of the critical mini-essays that served as "inter-chapters" in my book *A Mind of Winter* (2019). I wanted to make them available as a separate, coherent series, my "book" on the imagination, the one that has lived in the back of my mind for my entire career, the one I'm so happy now to have realized in this form. *A Mind of Winter* also included an identical number of personal essays, based on my walks in the woods here in Olympia, Washington, the kind of essays I've been writing for the last 5 years, since my wife passed suddenly in 2015. I am assembling those essays simultaneously under the title *Spring Forward*, a book much like my previous "seasonal" books, more akin to "nature writing," broadly construed, than to a "history of ideas," as these essays are.

I like nature writing quite a lot, have done more than my share of it. It's what I do foundationally in my most recent books, describe what I see on my walks in the woods, that is. But, as you know if you've read any of them, it's not all I do when I walk in the woods, nor is it all I want to convey when I write about what happens there. If it were, I would be writing these essays after every walk, an ongoing documentary journal of sorts. But I don't do that. I write in waves, something of consequence on my mind that I can't quite fathom, something that makes the natural world somehow more luminous to me, urging me to write about it, not simply for that reason but also as a scrim for figuring out what is currently vexing me, indistinct as it might be. One of these waves will last a month or so, run its course, and then feels done, whatever needed to get sorted, sorted, to the best of my ability at least. Then I don't write for many months.

My head, like most heads, is chock full of other stuff that gets triggered by what I see and hear, opening portals toward other kinds of writing, my poems, the works of great poets and thinkers I know, concepts, ideas, obsessions that have befriended me all my life, questions I keep trying to fathom to deeper and deeper levels, hoping never to reach bottom. Those things end up in my essays and they help me along my way. So when I'm in a writing wave, right from the outset I'm kind of angling around to find what all this action is "about," for me first, and then, I hope, for you. Each of my other books turned out to be "about" something that gradually revealed itself during the composition process, a something that both sustained and hovered above all of the details of my walks, made those details come to life at a level beyond immediate perceptions.

*First, Summer*, for example, the book I wrote during my early months in Olympia, was about the problem of seeing what's right before our eyes, how hard that can be when you've taken those eyes far enough away from their native haunts that nothing looks familiar any longer. Yes, we do see, but it just doesn't get processed very well, certainly not well enough to find words to record or report it. That was my conundrum last summer: how to write a book when I had no words to put it in, or into it. My sense this winter has been that that is still an issue for me, but one with larger implications, not any longer the problem of tongue-tiedness, an inability to make my available "vocabulary" match the immediate landscape, but the larger question: Having now made my adjustment, what made it possible to do that, especially at my age, more a "mind of winter," frozen in place than a child learning for the first time.

In mid-February, I just happened to pick up William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All*, a book I've read many times and taught several times, so I know it well. It is I am firmly convinced his retort, full force, to T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," which had been published the previous year, the "appearance" of

which Williams later called, in his *Autobiography,* "the great catastrophe to our [American] letters" (146). The extremity of *Spring and All* derives in large part from that. For Williams, this was not a mere "poetic" difference. It was political, cultural, philosophical. It was, really, all of life on the line. Eliot had, from his point of view, put a full stop on an emergent Modernism that was in his "American grain," finally breaking free from Eliot's preference, the "mind of Europe." Its lineage went back to Whitman not to the French pre-surrealists. He compared Eliot's poem to a nuclear bomb exploding his hope and vision. He was both heartbroken and furious. So he wrote this dazzling, zany, hybridic blast of book. I love that kind of rage, in him and in me.

Williams' book contains those famous little poems that end up in schoolbook anthologies, each propped up as an isolated, individual artifact. If you've read any of Williams' poems, it is likely these. The "red wheelbarrow" poem (none of them have titles in the book, only Roman numerals) is the most famous, if the least radical among them:

*so much depends*
*upon*

*a red wheel*
*barrow*

*glazed with rain*
*water*

*beside the white*
*chickens. (74)*

Twenty-seven of these are scattered throughout his book like little islands of calm jutting up in the midst of the turbulent ocean of his prose manifesto on behalf of the "Imagination." Parts of his argument are awesome, parts are unintelligible, parts

are nonsensical, parts are hilarious in their extremity. It is a wild ride, this book that not many ever read. And the poems, some seemingly so slight when wrenched out and read separately, exactly the kind of poems that make many students wonder what's so great about poetry anyway, I could write that in my sleep, are luminous in their native habitat here, like deft sketches for what Modernist poems in a truly American tradition might look like or aspire toward. They are the parts of the book that help his overall argument make sense in a practical way.

Given how I moved, I was only able to bring about ten books with me. That was one of them. That's how much I like it. I thought I was being drawn to it because I was craving spring and it wasn't anywhere in the neighborhood yet, all that "historically deep" snow we had around then, one thing I was familiar with and had hoped never to see again when I moved here. But something he says early on struck me in a new way this time:

> *The reader knows himself as he was twenty years ago and he has also in mind a vision of what he would be, some day. Oh, some day! But the thing he never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment that he is. And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested. Ergo, who cares for anything I do? And what do I care. (2-3)*

That is exactly how I feel, catching up with myself, now that my "some day," this retirement that I always envisioned spending with my wife Carol is something else entirely. Her passing so suddenly 4 years ago jolted me into a "now" that stayed stuck in place for a long time, never moving off that spot, like a scratched record, not the sort of "now" Williams is recommending here. Then the record played again, one new now after another, the way music flows. You hear the note that's playing, inflected perhaps by the one that just vacated the air, yes, and, yes, preparing the air for the one that will follow, but still only that

note sounds, making it a once in a lifetime moment, right now. All there is now for me is that right now, so, like Williams, I say, what do I care? For anything. It is an exciting and an unnerving existential condition, both to live in and to write from.

But it's what he says next that pointed me toward my "about" for this book: He says, "To whom then am I addressed ? To the imagination" (3). I've read that sentence numerous times before. But its radicality never really sank it. Williams is not writing from the imagination, the traditional way of thinking about creative composition. He is writing to the imagination, implying that while one's imagination may be an internal engine, it is also in a way extrinsic, with a life of its own, maybe not a "muse" in the traditional sense of that word, but serving exactly the same purpose. Wallace Stevens, thoroughly agnostic, uses the term "necessary angel"—the figment of some spiritual creative helpmate that remains even when you don't believe in spirits any longer—to name this function. It has a mind of its own, even if it's in our own minds, one smart enough to give us what we are not smart enough to get on our own, our everyday regular own.

And it's also dangerous, as Williams goes on to say:

> *The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill. The imagination is supreme. To it all our works forever, from the remotest past to the farthest future, have, are and will be dedicated. (5)*

He says this in the context of a bizarre, hyperbolic, clearly satiric paean to "the annihilation of every human creature on the face of the earth" (5). But the sentences above suggest the same thing: The imagination is a force of its own, one we cannot and should not seek to control with "prohibitions." It needs to be free to do its essential work. And one of the things it does is destroy. There is no way to remake without destroying. I knew that when I got

here and couldn't "see" any longer. I had destroyed my world. I needed to remake it, to learn how to see again. And it is the imagination that makes that possible.

I immediately recalled the term that Coleridge invented to characterize the imagination: "esemplastic." What a perfect word, this combination of the Latin *plasticus*, "moldable" and the Greek *es hen,* "into one." It doesn't matter how far afield you go or how old you are, the imagination is still willing and able to adapt, transformatively, make your world whole again, if you let it. I understand that all of the things I'm talking about under the aegis of that term, including the apparent out-of-bodiness I will come to later, could well be attributed to neurochemical activities in my brain. In fact, neuroscientists use a similar term these days, plasticity, to describe the eternal adaptability of the brain. I have no problem with that. Imagination simply gives me a way of naming whatever force supervises and synthesizes all of this creative activity. It may or may not be spiritual in the conventional sense of that word, but what it does is akin to what a muse, or an angel, or a soul does to humanize us and to help us on our way here.

Here's Walt Whitman writing about something like this, as he experiences it:

*Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.*

*Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,*
*Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn. . .*

*I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you*
*And you must not be abased to the other.*

*Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,*

*Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or*
*lecture, not even the best,*
*Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice. (30-32)*

Yes, the unseen is proved by the seen until that becomes unseen, a full circle. Yes, loafe, the lull, the hum. Exactly. That is the imagination at work. Before anything unseen gets seen or anything unsaid gets said.

So, now, I had my "about." And it is a good one for me to have now. I always think the book I'm writing will be my last, even if I stay on here longer enough to make another. I've been writing about the power of the imagination from the outset of my career. My first publication, a wild manifesto (for that buttoned-down historical moment) that lost me the job I had and found me my next one, had the cosmic title of "Rewording the Rhetoric of Composition," which I felt, at age 30, I was clearly qualified to do; and I was, in addition, mad enough to try. The last section of that essay is called "Renaming the Imagination," another hubristic gesture from a very passionate young man. Here are the first and then final sentences of that section of the article:

> *In order to restore language as a functionally creative element in acts of composition, it is necessary to begin to specify those mental processes through which language enacts expression. These processes are best organized under the aegis of a concept that has long been a commonplace in the lexicon of rhetoric: imagination. . . . My motive is not that of an antiquarian seeking to preserve an historical monument for aesthetic reasons. I believe that we need the term, for it allows us to say some things about thinking, knowing and writing that are otherwise unsayable. . . . (85)*
>
> [*I*]*t is through the mediate power of what I have named imagination, and through its principal instrument,*

> *language-as-metaphor, that this transformation has been accomplished. To abide by any rhetoric, then, that dismisses that creative potential, either by trivializing it or by ignoring it, is not only to misconstrue what language is for, but also to fail to appreciate what we as human beings really are. (90)*

Even now, reading them, I am thrilled. What an ambition for a young man to have. And I still agree with myself 40 years hence. That is cool. I have in the meantime written about the imagination and imaginative processes in many of my works, both critical and creative. I always wanted to write a book "about" the imagination. I could just never figure out how. Now I have. This is it. Or, depending on how it goes (I'm writing this in advance of much of the "scholarly" work it will involve) it's as close as I'll ever get to one. I may be too old to be as blasphemous (in a good way) as Williams was when he was in his thirties, or as I was at that age. But I'm not dead, either. So, Paul, let's get to it.

* * *

I followed historical sequence with these essays, from the pre-Socratics to the Projectivists. I skipped the postmodernist moment (1960-2000) entirely. If, as I say in one of these pieces, the Modernists were anti-Romantically Romantic, the postmodernist agenda, critical, philosophical, cultural, all of it, was anti-Romantically anti-Romantic. I am a Romanticist at heart, always was, always will be. I like all those cool terms they take as everyday matters: the ineffable, presence, being, muses, angels, all of it. And, of course, imagination. These concepts were anathema to most died-in-the-wool postmodernists, hopelessly "nostalgic," like religion was to Marx: "the opiate of the masses." People like me.

One of the unfortunate consequences of this is I don't get to write about all of the amazing poets of that era, one in which

women and writers of color not only entered the scene but, finally, took it over. Many of them use the word imagination, but not as a keystone concept. Why would they? They have ambitions on the political side that may make a term like that seem too private, even effete. I applaud all of that. As a result, though, of this historical caesura I end up, with only a couple of exceptions, writing about all DWMs. Maybe that's for the best in a way. I am one of them. Except for the D part, I'm pretty sure, at least most days. I'm properly disenfranchised from staking a claim too far outside my assigned and very privileged territory. They don't need me to speak for them, and I shouldn't presume I can.

The form of this book is more like a brunch buffet than a sit-down meal. Though it seems like a "natural" historical narrative, there is no necessary sequence to the pieces or the thinking they represent. Each theorist is merely one permutation of what to me is an ongoing fascination with the creative agency of the human mind, which I call here "imagination," even though some of these theorists never use that word. It is the constancy, not the progression that interests me. So you can pick the ones you're most interested in among all of this in whatever combination you fancy. Make it breakfast or lunch. Or both. Skip around. Leave the parts you can't eat, all that gluten, fat or sugar for some, all those fruits and vegetables for others, pick the things you like. Go back for more if you want. The heated pans will always be full. Or try something new, just to see if you like it. In any case, I hope, when you're done, you'll feel sated, whatever your appetite or tastes happen to be.

* * *

It has taken me some courage to put forth my recent books of essays without any sort of pre-reading, review, or vetting by anyone but me. I had my reasons for doing it that way with *This Fall*, the first foray in my "seasonal" series, so personal and urgent and intimate were those essays, as I explained in the

book's preface. That logic is less pressing now, four years later, my having to some extent "recovered" from the trauma of loss that started all of this. I was actually tempted to send a draft of this manuscript to a few of my favorite colleagues for advice. But I didn't. I figured I trusted myself back then, why not now? Besides, many of the poets I write about did just that: trusted themselves, took their chances. As W.S. Merwin, just passed this week, said in his moving tribute to his first poetic mentor, John Berryman:

> *I had hardly begun to read*
> *I asked how can you ever be sure*
> *that what you write is really*
> *any good at all and he said you can't*
>
> *you can't you can never be sure*
> *you die without knowing*
> *whether anything you wrote was any good*
> *if you have to be sure don't write*

I am not sure of anything now, least of all my writing. So I write what I need and want to write, send it forth as fast as I can (thus my preference for this mode of publication) in good faith. I am not a famous writer, a recognized poet. I write not as if my life depended on it, as Berryman did: My life would be quite fine if I never put another word on paper. I'd still get to think and feel what I think and feel, just as you do, by dint of my humanness, and it is astonishing, the dark, the light, the beauty, the joy, the fear, the tears, all of it, just stunning. I don't write what I already know. I write to let some deeper, better part of me teach me something I don't know. It may be a Goddess without or a goddess within, it may be transcendent or simply another hidden function of my brain. I read what I write over and over trying to fathom what that "great presence," another term Berryman uses in his advice to Merwin, has to teach me. And I am over and over dumbfounded, rendered literally wordless,

when I encounter it. It is, in my shorthand here, the Imagination, to whom I am "addressed."

I close each of these essays with a poem, of my own or by another poet, briefly introduced, one that seems pertinent; mostly to get more poems in, always a good thing, to me at least. All of the poems I include here, especially so many of my own, may seem self-indulgent to you. Some readers felt the poems I appended to my book *Re-reading Poets* were exactly that. And they were, no question. Back then I cared about what people thought in regard to my excesses. Now I don't. So I am self-indulgent. What do I care? And, well, the book you're reading is either free (on my website) or so cheap (by contrast with that other book of mine, published by a traditional press) that you can leave that part of it on your plate if you want, scrape it off into the waste bin on the way out (it's a buffet, remember, no table service or bussing) and still feel you got your money's worth on the meal.

*Bon appetit.*

## Parmenides

*The horses that take me to the ends of my mind*
*were taking me now: the drivers had put me*
*on the road to the Goddess, the manifest Way*
*that leads the enlightened through every delusion.*

*I was on that road. Wizard mares*
*strained at the chariot and maidens drove it.*

. . .

*Where I begin is all one to me*
*Wherever I begin I will return again . . .*

*Speaking and thinking are the same as WHAT IS.*
*WHAT IS exists*
*Nothing does not*
*Keep this before you*

*. . . for to think and to be are one*
*and the same*

Parmenides (11, 14)

This is where I begin the series of mini-essays that I hope will amount to my "book" on the imagination, in the 5th century BCE: "all one to me"—a distinctive power of imagination in Western history, its capacity to unify separate multiples, fuse contraries—with Parmenides, on the road to the Goddess, thinking and being one and the same, my definition of the imagination in its purest form—again, a distinctive power, its capacity to synthesize discrete perceptions into seamless "worlds" and then embody these evanescent inner experiences in vivid external forms. While, Parmenides says, "nothing" does

not exist, it remains, even here I'd say, a subtle presence in the equation, the "is not" that makes "what is" possible, a more cryptic version of the function "nothing" serves, 2500 years later, in Wallace Stevens' poem "The Snow Man,"

> *For the listener, who listens in the snow,*
> *And, nothing himself, beholds*
> *Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.*

You will see these basic elements in the many theories I explore along the way, with Coleridge at the apical pivot point a couple of thousand years hence and a couple of hundred years ago.

The work of Parmenides, like all the pre-Socratic thinkers, survived primarily in fragments, via quotations in other texts for example, which scholars subsequently assembled in the ways that made the most sense. His work is, as you can see, stunningly intense. He has been appropriated into the ongoing narrative that is the "history of philosophy" as the original monist, everything singular and unchanging; the one who first separates appearances from reality, setting up Plato's later concept of transcendent "ideas" both distinct from and superior to their instantiations in our everyday world. I have no interest in that Parmenides, if he ever even existed in such a simplistic form. Read the opening six lines above, which introduce his long, ecstatic vision of a young man's journey to the heavens via a speed-of-light flaming chariot pulled by wizard mares to meet the Goddess who will teach him her wisdom. Wow, "monist" is quite a redaction of all those pyrotechnics.

Parmenides, among the many things he was—shaman, cosmologist, philosopher, teacher—was first and foremost a poet. Just read those opening lines again. What else could you call that but a poem? Yes, he did propose a "Being" that was changeless, eternal, even timeless, one that we humans can encounter face to face, as he does in the heavens via the young man in his space-age chariot. And yes, he offers the original

ontological alternative to Heraclitus, for whom all was changeful, who famously never stepped into the same river twice. I like Heraclitus too, quite a lot. Philosophers have explored this baffling conundrum, the seeming contrariness of multiplicity and unity, flux and stillness, from these two bad-boys through to Badiou. To pit one against another, though, especially as progenitors of two competing traditions seems stupid to me. A poet wouldn't do that.

Poets are not just capable of but defined by a capacity that Keats calls "negative capability," a chronic state of generative irresolution between competing mental states. Emerson similarly poo-poos "a foolish consistency," that this-or-that-but-never-both mentality that afflicts Western thinking, the "hobgoblin of little minds" he calls it (138). Whitman ratchets that up several notches further: "So I contradict myself," he says, "I am large, I contain multitudes" (95). For him it's not even binary, an either/or. He can keep multitudes of competing, even contradictory thoughts and ideas quite comfortably of a piece, like what a quantum computer might be a generation from now, as you know if you have read any of his work. That's what a poet does. That's what all of us do, I believe, no matter what "philosophers" might say.

The primary term I'll be recurring to here to name the faculty of mind that makes that kind of magic possible is "imagination," a term that the British and American Romantics elevated to the pinnacle of human being-in-the-world, that many of the Modernists used to leverage out their various poetic systems, a term that has been mostly off the menu, or at its margins, for the last couple of generations. I'm not necessarily interested in re-valorizing it, establishing a new Romanticism. For me it's more a placeholder for the human function that makes life alive, that makes poems poems, that makes me happy, here, now, possible even. And Parmenides is where I begin, those horses, the ends of my mind, the manifest Way. WHAT IS exists, all one to me.

## Poem

I wrote this poem in the early fall of 1971 after an evening walk in Frick Park in Pittsburgh, where I had moved shortly after graduating from college. I was unemployed and living under, well, dire economic distress (I'll spare you the details) waiting for an induction notice into the US Army. A few months earlier I had taken and passed my military physical and been "awarded" a 1-A designation, the only A I ever would have gladly traded for a (4)F. I went in that day with at least three exemptionable conditions, including being beneath the minimum weight for service, which I achieved naturally, just by being extremely skinny all my life. I had a note from a doctor for the other two. No matter. I passed. Where I came from, a rural county in the anthracite coal mining region of northeastern Pennsylvania, they passed everyone. I laugh when I hear that Donald Trump was exempted for "bone spurs." Where I came from—no one had money even remotely of that consequence—they would have said, "Oh, so you have bones, great, pass." Money can buy anything in this country, I knew even back then--including, I found out in more detail this week, admission to the college of your choice, with a scholarship in a sport you cannot play. And, of course, "exoneration." "Hey, the poor guy has bone spurs. How much should he have to suffer in this life?"

In the draft "lottery" I had the misfortune (my birthday on the 13th maybe) of drawing a low number, 121, almost a shoo-in for a call-up. The year before I graduated they had drafted much higher than that, in the 190s, as best I can remember. So I waited. Knowing I wasn't going to report, I mulled my range of horrible options, trying to decide which I'd pick. I had ruled out CO, knowing I was not beyond killing under the right circumstances. The day of my physical I felt I might want to kill

any number of the horrible people I encountered in my many hours of walking around in my underwear.

After the physical was over, around 5, I was waiting for my brother to come and pick me up. We had been discharged into the street and it was pouring, I mean Biblical pouring. By the time my brother came, with my mother in the car, I was surprised to see, I was drenched to the skin. And cold. They both thought it was too dangerous to drive in that downpour, that we should wait it out. I said, "I'll drive" and I proceeded to do just that, about 60 miles an hour over narrow country roads, able to see maybe three feet in front of the car. I always trusted my senses and my instincts, especially under pressure, so I felt safe and in control the whole way. My mother vowed never to get in a car with me again. I mean once we got home, without my having killed her.

One of the blessings of my life has been the way that, from time to time, poetic possession, what I'll call, following Plato, a "divine madness" in the next inter-chapter, can take me out of myself, relieve me of my diurnal "me-ness" for a few minutes, allow me to be absorbed, in a good way, by what I see around me, illuminated from within by its "what-ness." That's what this poem is about, in the midst of my angst, just taking this magical walk in Frick Park. I can't remember if there was also external illumination that night. I say "like moonlight" in the poem, and I tend to say what I see, so I'm assuming there was. The transmogrification happens just like that, leaving behind "nothing but moonlight in a thicket." And "all that he wanted to say." That "he" is both "me," the one who actually says something even though "I do not know what to say," and some inner or outer "not-me" who comes like a thief in the night to take what he wants, leaving behind these traces of words. Yes, the imagination.

This poem never found a publisher in its day, or any day, though I always thought it should have. Until, that is, a few years ago, after a young friend of mine, exactly my age when I wrote the poem, the smartest person I met in my time at the University of Pittsburgh, found it on my website and wrote an extended commentary that brought tears to my eyes. I documented all of this in *This Fall*, its debut. And now it gets to take its walk again.

## *The Poet Comes Out at Night*

*He waits in a thicket*
*like moonlight seeping*
*down along twig-tip,*
*leaf-vein and branch.*

*Suddenly the razor*
*edge of his voice leans*
*cold and gentle against*
*my throat, prodding.*

*I follow each flick*
*of the blade adazzle*
*with moonlight and*
*do not know what to say.*

*I empty my wallet*
*in his hands, empty*
*my pockets in his hands,*
*empty my hands . . .*

*He leaves behind*
*nothing but moonlight*
*in a thicket, all that*
*he wanted to say.*

# Plato

> *As to the soul's immortality then we have said enough, but as to its nature there is this that must be said. What manner of thing it is would be a long tale to tell, and most assuredly a god alone could tell it, but what it resembles, that a man might tell in briefer compass. Let this therefore be our manner of discourse. Let it be likened to the union of powers in a team of winged steeds and their winged charioteer.*
>
> Plato, *Phaedrus* (246a)

Socrates, writing a generation after Protagoras, and by implication Plato, the "student" who documents his dialogues, say all kinds of disparaging things about the poet and poetry in general, most famously in the *Republic*, from which he deemed the poet's banishment necessary. And, in the speech I quote above, his second speech on love directed to young Phaedrus, a soaring testimony on behalf of love's beauty, goodness and power, shortly after the above passage, he relegates the poet to the 6th level down on the human totem pole, with the philosopher, of course, first and the tyrant last, 9th. So the poet is definitely on the lower half of the curve, a lightweight, a purveyor of semblances, those imaginative figments several steps removed from the higher Ideas. Yet here at the most crucial point in this speech, performing what is always the most crucial part of the Socratic argument, defining terms, he turns to poetry, metaphor, as his preferred "discourse," one suited to "a man" not the gods.

Over and over in the dialogues Socrates quotes extensively and respectfully the poets of his age, always from memory, exact memory, most especially when he has a complex or subtle distinction to make, one that might take many pages to work out in its fullness, as in the *Protagoras* for example where he uses a

poem/song of Simonides' to tease out his ideas about being and becoming, the absolute keystone in his critique of that great sophist Protagoras. Sophists, by the way, are 8th down on the pecking order of value in this world, below even the poets.

And he says this earlier in the *Phaedrus*:

> *All the great arts require endless talk and ethereal speculation about nature. This seems to be what gives them their lofty point of view and universal applicability. (270a, p. 515)*

It is, to my way of reading, by this means, "ethereal speculation about nature," what another translator calls "star-gazing," and by extended, extemporaneous conversation with others, or even in our own heads, that truths become "written on the soul" (276a, 521), which is, given Socrates' aversion to actually copying things down in a textual form, the only kind of "writing" he endorses.

Beyond that, I can't imagine that anyone could read Plato without leaving with both an admiration for and a deep feeling from his poetic genius. Yes, I know, he is claimed by philosophy, at least in the archives of the contemporary academy, absorbing him into that discipline, now 2500 years in the making, so far removed from his local moment. Socrates is a very smart man. He must surely see the irony in moves of the sort I just described in his arguments, which happen over and over, whereby the very "logical" point he is making is undercut by the terms of its making. I could list example after example of this, but they have been quite well documented by his postmodern counterparts, most especially Jacques Derrida. But Plato, to me, is even smarter, or at least inevitably more self-aware of all of this, because he is actually writing it down. His is not the one-and-done kind of interlocution preferred by his mentor, who never wrote down one word of his thinking. Over and over, I can't help but see Plato smiling the smile of a poet, knowing he is both saying and doing at least two things at the

same time, sometimes more, mutually contradictory things, the kind of sleight of hand worthy of a poet, of the imagination.

My main point here is this: Both Socrates and Plato turn to poetic discourse, and often, to do the main work of their argument. So why? Well, Socrates says why above: Because when faced with the greatest mysteries and conundrums of being in this world, not only is resemblance, figurative language, the only "discourse" we have for examining and declaring it, it is actually, quite astonishingly, more efficient than the one the gods have! We can do quickly what would take them much longer. Okay, maybe in the end they would do it better, but Socrates says over and over here and elsewhere that, while we may become more asymptotically godly on this earthly plane, and need to if we ever hope to escape our painful cycle of earthly lives, we are not gods. We, therefore, can't have their discourse even if we wanted it. And their discourse cannot in any case be constituted by words, language, or any other available mode of semblance and simulation, the only kinds we humans have and must rely on—all dissociative in some way—to convey what we see and know.

When we approach the godly state of mind, as, for example, the kind of love that this speech describes and endorses, it is beyond our human capacity to render directly. It is, to use a concept from Longinus, writing a few centuries down the line, sublime. And it can only be intimated figuratively, poetically, held in the spell of a very specific kind of "madness," a madness that comes from the gods. This becomes a mode of "vision" that in rendering the truth, actually changes the way we see, look at, apprehend what is beautiful before us, whatever "beloved" that might be.

Yes, that is love. That is what vision informed by love does. And vision informed by love is poetry. QED. That is where my argument starts and ends. Were I arguing with Socrates, he probably would find some tricky way to escape this bind of both

diminishing the value of poetry while he uses it to do his most important work. I'm probably not quick enough to "win" under those circumstance, though I don't think I'd be as stupid as either Phaedrus or Protagoras is. But he and I would know what the truth is.

As H. D. says 2500 years later:

> *Socrates' whole doctrine of vision was a doctrine of love.*
>
> *We must be "in love" before we can understand the mysteries of vision. (22)*

And, if we can love what we see well enough to be fully taken by the madness of the gods, it will find its way into a "reality" that is poetic, no matter what "appearance" it might take on. Absent the language of the gods, this is the most godly way we have to say what we are in love with here, to the imagination "addressed."

## Poem

I wrote this poem in the late 1980s, another very stressful time. I was coming up for tenure (the academic equivalent of the draft physical, in or out, today, no "deferments," and in this case a 1-A was clearly preferable to a 4-F) in a department that was in turmoil, some of which had to do with me. Again, I'll spare you the details. I had a brand-new daughter at home, Bridget, who is now my near-neighbor out here in the Northwest. I was worried. If I got turned down, it could have been 1971 all over again.

I was walking to work down the hill through Schenley Park in Pittsburgh, my usual route, a bright spring day, the trees in that early transitional phase, each twig-tip half bud half leaf, that half green half yellow shade of flora you only see for a few days at exactly that moment, thinking about my lifetime's-worth of

moments when I felt at one with the trees, like they were my actual peers, wishful I could just turn into one and get it over with. The Greek myth of Daphne turning into a tree to escape from the love-mad Apollo, one Socrates would have known, crossed my mind, and all those myths about a time when people believed that sort of transmogrification could actually happen to real people in real life. That's the first part of the poem.

All of this called to mind an incident I remember from early childhood where a very big tree felt to me like it wanted to absorb me directly into it. That's part II. Parts III and IV document more immediate moments in relation to this theme, those two birds in that blue sky, so vivid I can still see them circling. And again, what's left behind is just these words on the page, "their voices or mine, singing." I had an article to finish up for publication, one crucial to my survival in the academy. I did finish it. But I wrote this poem first. I hate that article. I love this poem.

## *For Daphne: On the Mornings After*

### *I*

*She told me how in her day*
*it happened matter-of-factly,*
*some girl on her way, say,*
*to the well, stopped in her tracks,*
*legs stiff as tree stumps,*
*feet rooted to the ground;*
*and from fingertips clutching*
*into a cloudless, blue sky,*
*thousands of leaves puffed*
*from their buds at once.*

*The news spread fast:*
*proud parents announcing it,*
*a coming out of sorts;*
*brothers and sisters amazed*
*at the luck of such a great story*
*to tell to their friends at school;*
*her boyfriend, well, at a loss,*
*a little miffed, missing her.*
*Later, all the celebrating done,*
*everyone else home and asleep,*
*he'd hold her in his arms all night,*
*promise never to marry.*

*II*

*I couldn't have been more than*
*5 or 6 when I first heard you*
*murmuring from the old elm*
*I had to walk past on my way*
*to the creek to play.*
*For years I steered clear,*
*trying not to listen.*
*Then one morning, my mind*
*too much abuzz with wonder*
*to stay away, I clung to the trunk*
*hoping to seep like a dark stain*
*into the clean wood beneath.*
*That night your words*
*turned into flocks of birds*
*swarming wildly by moonlight*
*across savannas of empty sky.*

*III*

*Last week, on my way to work,*
*the hollow of my head filling up,*
*as usual, with a cloudless,*
*blue sky, two birds circling*
*without a place to settle,*
*my legs just suddenly stiffened;*
*tendrils descended from*
*my feet, holding me hard; arms,*
*flung up to steady myself,*
*locked, hands cupped*
*open like empty nests.*

*Clouds of doubts massed up,*
*passing in fast-forward,*
*rationales I ransacked*
*in my panic for an answer:*
*the inevitable and graceless*
*changes of age? the grappling*
*fingers of someone else's past?*
*death's staccato laughter?*
*Then the birds settled*
*and I heard again your words.*

*IV*

*I notice it now mostly mornings:*
*a little stiffness in my hips,*
*that ringing in my ears.*
*All day the birds busy themselves*
*with nesting. By night*
*they settle down to rest.*

*I hear only the ceaseless music*
*of their voices, or mine, singing*
*of loves lost and then recovered,*
*ever the same song, growing*
*simpler and more clear,*
*nearer to the light into which*
*we are always rising up or settling,*
*beyond which there is nothing more now*
*either one of us needs to say.*

# Aristotle

> *Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else . . . (1457b)*
>
> *The greatest thing by far, is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblance. (1459a)*
>
> Aristotle, *Poetics*

I have very little to say back to or about Aristotle, Plato's student, in regard to any of this. I think the first famous sentence in my epigraph is just not true and the second famous sentence is trivial. The whole notion that a name "belongs to" what it names implies that the foundational state of language is representational, this is this and that is that, no blurs, no overlaps; that the vector connecting word and thing is unilinear and direct. And that figurative language is a rare exception—transgressive, essentially erroneous. He isolates it in a group of other opaque elements of speech that includes, for example, "strange" or "foreign" words, which, of course, absent expertise or fluency, are unintelligible. Aristotle's concept of "belonging" seems to me to imply that we can in fact speak in the discourse of the gods. It may take a long time, but it will be precise, clear and distinct. Just like his prose seems, those many, many books—fifty have survived, and he may have written three or four times that many—all lined up neatly with clear titles on the bookshelf of Western intellectual history.

I can't buy that. Even Socrates wouldn't buy that. And Plato, his mentor, I think would find it way too simplistic. As to teachable? The only reason it might not be "teachable" in conventional academic terms is there is no need to teach it. You just have to

nurture and encourage it. Everyone already knows how to use figures because that's what language is. Open your mouth and something poetic will come out. No word "belongs" to anything. You may or may not like that, but it is the way it is. At least to a vast array of great thinkers, including a few philosophers. And to me.

Aristotle's *Poetics*, from which those sentences are extracted, is, of course, a landmark of critical thinking on modes of creative discourse and their effects, and in tandem with his *Rhetoric*, his treatise on expository discourse, Aristotle basically erected both the paradigm for and named the two primary categories of discourse we use to convey knowledge. You can see remote artifacts of that paradigm in contemporary English departments, which differentiate categorically between composition/rhetoric and literature/critical theory. These two classes of intellectuals have a hard time even talking with one another. I won't blame Aristotle for all of that (academics like it that way) but, well, he started it by putting them in two separate books.

More specifically, he named and defined the many distinct types of metaphor down to their finest details, and we rely on those definitions still today in textbook approaches for naming the poetic figures we must come to terms with in the processes of writing and reading, things with names like synecdoche and paraphrasis, and, well, you have no idea what the difference is, do you, that's how esoteric it becomes. But, to me, he is just boring, tiresome, kind of mechanistic, a good taker-aparter but not a great put-back-togetherer. The imagination is a putter-togetherer. Likewise, Aristotle is not "mad" in the ways that interest me, as a poet, as a human presence in this world. Plato is mad in a beautiful, often wryly funny way. Socrates is mad in a wiry, weird way. Aristotle, totally sane. Every sentence is confidently declarative, never a question mark in sight. Were Aristotle to read most of what I've written, he'd be most likely appalled, think I'm mad, too. And he'd be right. I am mad. But

in a good way. So, I have very little to say about Aristotle. Read him for yourself.

## Poem

This is a needlessly long poem (for here, I mean, not in itself), the final poem in a book called *Harvest Moon* that I wrote in a literal state of "lunacy" in September 2016, held fully under the sway of that year's actual "harvest moon." I picked it because, toward the end, I make a funny (to me) reference to Aristotle as the source of many of the problems that afflict both Western thinking and the organizational structure of the modern university.

### *9/19/2016: And now, right now, I'm calling this one done*

*That moon tonight looks a lot like me,*
*not quite altogether, beach ball*
*the day after, half flat the left*
*side of its head, migraine maybe,*
*air gone missing. I have no idea*
*why we both went from wide-awake*
*light brimming over everywhere,*
*puffy-cheeked kid with such a smile,*
*to saggy, dimmed down, looking out*
*through vague, smudgy haze*
*that either seeped out or seeped in,*
*about as much light as that night-*
*light I use now, not because I'm*
*afraid of the dark, because I'm*
*afraid I'll get afraid of it if I don't.*

*Kind of a relief, really, so intense,*
*too much pressure to keep*
*the air in, pour the light out,*
*teaching-head heavy instead of*
*TV-head light. Hear that hissing?*
*the air still going out of that moon*
*from last night, my head, this book,*
*five days in and it's already half-*
*flat, like I'm stuck in all of Zeno's*
*paradoxes at once, the half-way one,*
*faster and faster to go slower*
*and slower, a book in 20 days,*
*then a book in 10 days, now*
*a book in 5 days, and I'm just*
*saying, I can't write another book*
*in 2.5 days, no way, I have chores*
*to do today that I put off to finish*
*this one, I teach tomorrow all day,*
*so you tell me, where does a book*
*get written there? and even if it did,*
*you know as well as Zeno does*
*that sooner or later I'll be writing*
*like a million books every microsecond*
*and I'll still never get to "done,"*
*and the arrow one, zinging along*
*so fast but each instant a standstill,*
*so which is it, zip-zip or zap?*
*time turning into space or*
*vice-versa and that's summer*
*in a nutshell, so stop-action*
*day after day you can't remember*
*anything that came before,*
*so fast it's like it didn't even happen,*
*and the race one, that tortoise*
*slow as those stones sliding*
*over mud in Death Valley*
*when the wind blows and*

*no matter how fast Achilles runs*
*he's can't ever catch him*
*with that too-big head start*
*he gave him, so if I'm Achilles,*
*and maybe I am for all I know,*
*I'm thinking, I'm going to make*
*a cup of tea and let that tortoise*
*sweat it out wondering whether*
*I'm gonna catch him at the wire*
*because he's too slow to know*
*that can never happen, no way,*
*and I'm not even running anyway.*

*And really, you could argue*
*this is not even a book, just another*
*half-book, like the last one,*
*that long line of half-books,*
*my history, and I was just trying*
*to decide whether to put checkered*
*or decorated in front of history*
*but the only way it sounded*
*like a poem was if I used both*
*and you can't because you end up*
*with two half-thoughts that can't*
*ever add up to one thought*
*each racing on a different track*
*toward half-books, and I'm*
*calling this one Paul's paradox*
*and, ditto, a cup of tea, Achilles,*
*let them run as long as they*
*want, because so what if I get*
*another half-book, it's a*
*whole-book world I work in,*
*and maybe that's why*
*I never get anywhere*
*in this poetry racket:*
*the only box you get*

*is just too damn big for what*
*I have to mail in, and sure,*
*I could unroll a half-book*
*of bubble wrap, and I got*
*a headful of it, believe me,*
*thousands of little pressed-*
*together polyvinyl pierogis,*
*keeping this bit of empty away*
*from that one, and you need them,*
*really do, because if all that empty*
*got together at once in there,*
*there would be trouble,*
*no way to say where this empty*
*ends and that one begins*
*on that long shelf of books,*
*the ones Aristotle named:*
*"this is this and that is that*
*and don't mix up them up,*
*OK, because it took me a lot*
*of work to get them apart like*
*that," the superhighway right to*
*wwwdotbubblewrapdotedu,*
*and for some reason I can't*
*seem to write one whole one.*

*But don't get me wrong,*
*I have no bone to pick with wwwdot,*
*not at all, because if it weren't*
*for wwwdot I'd be, what,*
*Emily Dickinson shoving stuff*
*in a drawer, where it dies, or I do,*
*and if I'm lucky, I mean like*
*lottery-type lucky, some*
*huge doofus like Higginson*
*(give me a break, Tom, what's with*
*the Wentworth?) swoops in, scoops it*
*up, says: don't look at her, look at me,*

*too big a prick to stick my neck out*
*for her while she was here and*
*would have loved it, maybe even me,*
*and hey, all I'm saying is if*
*she says to me "I love you,"*
*I'm outa here, like lickety-split,*
*not even giving her the fake statue act,*
*just, well, you know, she's wacked-*
*out as all hell and those poems*
*are like, WTF? but, hey, now she's*
*gone, looky here, slicked up by me,*
*they look like a good whole book.*
*I'm so-o-o smart. Well, no, Tom,*
*you're not, YOU are NOT!*

*And I know enough now to know*
*it wasn't always this way, take*
*Parmenides, he hardly wrote even*
*a half-book, and he's on Amazon,*
*OK, I know, someone has to write*
*a long preface and add lots of notes*
*and there's tons of white space so it*
*doesn't just end up being 10 pages*
*and when you pick it up you think*
*it's just two covers bubblewrapped*
*around empty, I got totally ripped off . . .*

*or I could just talk, not bother*
*with all this typed-up hype, like*
*Socrates, say, never wrote down*
*one word, just yakked and yakked*
*with anyone he could track down,*
*and I would love, just love, to be*
*yak-yakking like that with smarties*
*about the soul, say, but the way*
*things work where I work I could sit*
*in my office with the door open*

*now 'til the cows come home,*
*feet on my desk, and not a soul*
*would walk through that door*
*to talk about the soul, all of them*
*crouching over desks behind*
*closed doors writing whole books so*
*they get to stay in the whole book*
*building here with all the other*
*whole book people, the ones*
*I mean who might wave, weak,*
*rushing by my office while I'm*
*waiting, but if all Plato had was*

*Protagoras: wave*

*Socrates: wave*

*well, there you have it,*
*nutshell around nothing, so . . .*

*I'm going to go for a walk. I'm back.*
*And first thing I noticed was*
*now all that air is out there was room*
*in there for me, I know, because*
*I was there, all of me, on the drive over,*
*not me talking to me, or pretending*
*I'm talking to you when, get real,*
*you know and I know you're not there,*
*no one is, not for a half-book*
*at wwwdot, I mean me just happy*
*being me, and the drive went so*
*slow, maybe not slow as that time*
*in the WABAC machine I smoked*
*some laced weed and it took me*
*a week to drive three miles home*
*and I was almost hoping I'd get*
*pulled over so I could ask the cop*

*am I really only driving .01 miles/hr?*

*Then I got there, and*
*the sunroots I walk through*
*right when I start are all*
*just slumped over now,*
*like their air was out, too,*
*a few flecks of yellow*
*still stuck up on the stems,*
*but summer on the run,*
*and that was the last thing*
*I can remember seeing*
*on that walk because*
*it was just me seeing*
*not me seeing so I could*
*pretend to see you seeing*
*me seeing. And now, right now,*
*I'm calling this one done.*
*and now, right now,*
*I'm calling lots of things done.*
*You might be one of them.*
*All I know is I'm not.*
*And this is not the end*
*because like I said: now*
*I'm on this side of*
*that. And when I say*
*now, I mean now.*

## Longinus

*A lofty passage does not convince the reason of the reader, but takes him out of himself. That which is admirable ever confounds our judgment, and eclipses that which is merely reasonable or agreeable. . . [A] sublime thought, if happily timed, illumines an entire subject with the vividness of a lightning-flash, and exhibits the whole power of the orator in a moment of time. . .*

*For instance, Sappho, in dealing with the passionate manifestations attending on the frenzy of lovers, always chooses her strokes from the signs which she has observed to be actually exhibited in such cases. But her peculiar excellence lies in the felicity with which she chooses and unites together the most striking and powerful features.*

> *"I deem that man divinely blest*
> *Who sits, and, gazing on thy face,*
> *Hears thee discourse with eloquent lips,*
> *And marks thy lovely smile.*
> *This, this it is that made my heart*
> *So wildly flutter in my breast;*
> *Whene'er I look on thee, my voice*
> *Falters, and faints, and fails;*
> *My tongue's benumbed; a subtle fire*
> *Through all my body inly steals;*
> *Mine eyes in darkness reel and swim;*
> *Strange murmurs drown my ears;*
> *With dewy damps my limbs are chilled;*
> *An icy shiver shakes my frame;*
> *Paler than ashes grows my cheek;*
> *And Death seems nigh at hand."*

*Is it not wonderful how at the same moment soul, body, ears, tongue, eyes, colour, all fail her, and are lost to her as completely as if they were not her own? Observe too how her sensations contradict one another—she freezes, she burns, she raves, she reasons, and all at the same instant. And this description is designed to show that she is assailed, not by any particular emotion, but by a tumult of different emotions. All these tokens belong to the passion of love; but it is in the choice, as I said, of the most striking features, and in the combination of them into one picture, that the perfection of this Ode of Sappho's lies.*

Longinus (20-23)

In the first passage above, Longinus, writing most likely in the 1st century CE, proffers his version of the effect "sublime" language has on "every reader:" "It takes him out of himself," a "lightning-flash." Once again, here is that structure of inside and outside being simultaneous. The term ecstasy, which is another way of naming this effect, means quite literally to stand outside oneself. This is not a simple out-of-body type thing, the actual body left behind. It is an embodied out-of-bodiness. That's what imaginative experience is at its finest, all the senses heightened to their extreme. In the second passage (which I included in part to get that cool Sappho poem in), Longinus describes what this same thing might feel like in real time. Sappho describes vividly the fleeing of her senses, an all-at-onceness that is ecstatic, "not her own," the contradictions among multiple senses, vividly co-present at-the-same-instant, the "tumult of different emotions," the "passion of love" that Socrates talks about as a "madness" from the gods, that other form of ecstasy, of standing outside our moment of time and space, "one picture . . . the perfection."

All of this might sound on the face of it unnerving, even scary, the apparent loss of control, I mean. But for Longinus, for me, for everyone I'll be writing about here, it is not that at all. It is a very normal human condition that we can enter on our own, by exercising imaginative initiative, either in everyday perception or as we lend ourselves to the most sublime works of others. I wrote about Longinus a couple of books ago, in *Last Spring*, and what I said then is pertinent here:

> *I was trying while I walked today to think of a poem to go along with what I was thinking, feeling, one of mine, someone else's, no matter. I couldn't think of one, not even a line, not even a word that seemed to fit. It was "sublime." Longinus, who wrote the book on sublimity a couple of millennia ago, the one that inspired the Romantic poets a couple of hundred years ago, basically, to my way of reading him at least, says that sublimity is not intrinsic to language or linguistic artifacts, no matter how powerful or beautiful they are. When I teach his book, I always use the analogy of a rocket ship. For Longinus, a "great" bit of writing is simply a vehicle that, if well-enough designed and crafted, can transport us right to the very edge of the medium it is made from, those words still held captive in their tiny province on the spectrum of human life in this world. Figurative language is the most powerful such booster, capable of thrusting us up to the very edges of our babbling biosphere. Once there, we just need to step outside, and we will go into orbit on our own, skimming off into the majesty of deep space, where we will float weightlessly, silently, the gravity of diurnal discourse too weak to pull us down, until we want or need to come home again. It takes a little courage to take that step, but the payoff is magnificent, an eternal here and now that is not parsed by grammar or syntax, those slaves of time we need for more mundane "communication" down here. There is no clear inside or outside. Just being.*

*As I have said, we have, historically, come up with a few vague words to describe that spacy state. I have never, of course, actually travelled into space. But I've seen the pictures taken from there. The earth, this generous caretaker, which seems like all there is when we are fully in its embrace, looks suddenly so small, beautiful, blue, but fragile, so, so small. And the space it navigates its tiny little circuit within is as close to infinite as a human mind can apprehend. Here, we make things with words, very useful things, often beautiful things, sometimes so much so, so over-full of themselves, that they can convey us to the brink of this transcendent elsewhere. That is where I was today, right outside of words, and then everywhere outside of words, where crying, laughing, or just staring incredulously at what is right before our eyes, are the most appropriate media for expression. It was sublime. (51-52)*

What I want to add now, having thought about it for another year, or at least through another couple "waves" of walks, is that it is imagination that allows us to experience such sublimity, on our own, when we're walking in the woods, when we seek to write something beautiful about what we find along the way. We are both in and outside of ourselves, in tune with what we know going in, what we come to know in the process, what we need to learn by reading and rereading what we write; or when we take the time to read something beautiful just because it is beautiful, gaining everything else it proffers in the process.

## Poem

I wrote this poem in the early 1980s. When I wake up in the morning I am often, as I've said, half in and half out of this world. I feel both silly and sublime. This particular morning the way the light played on the window appeared to me to be angelic. Literally. As I watched, not sure how long, the light

migrated upward and that was that, an encounter with the heavens to start my day. The "halo" such an encounter leaves behind lasts for a while, but sooner or later the world takes over again, all that's left of that halo's light just a distant, perplexed look on the face, one that others find strange, even uncomfortable. This poem is about that. Then over the coming days I wrote a series of five "Morning Songs" following the same general format. I'm not sure if Longinus would consider this a piece of "sublime" writing, maybe too playful for that. But it describes a sublime experience and invites readers to share it.

### *Morning Song 1*

*This morning*
*many small angels gathered*
*on my window as if*
*they might stay*
*all day to pray or*
*picnic there, happily*
*for no reason in particular.*

*When they moved their luminous*
*heads, splinters of daylight streaked*
*all across my room.*
*After a while they filed*
*quietly upward and*
*out of my sight.*

*I leaned back more solidly*
*in my chair and smiled, thinking:*
*they have nothing*
*whatever to do with*
*the day I am*
*about to waste now.*

*On my way to work a passerby*
*glanced at me a second*
*time thinking: that man*
*must have seen angels on*
*his window this morning,*
*while I slept.*

## Philip Sidney

*For conclusion, I say the philosopher teacheth, but he teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him; that is to say, he teacheth them that are already taught. But the poet is the food for the tenderest stomachs; the poet is, indeed, the right popular philosopher. . .*

*Thus doing [loving poets and poetry], your names shall flourish in the printers' shops: thus doing, you shall be of kin to many a poetical preface: thus doing, you shall be most fair, most rich, most wise, most all: you shall dwell upon superlatives . . .*

*But if (fie of such a but!) you be born so near the dull-making cataract of Nilus, that you cannot hear the planet-like music of poetry; if you have so earth-creeping a mind, that it cannot lift itself up to look to the sky of poetry, or rather, by a certain rustical disdain, will become such a Mome, as to be a Momus of poetry; then, though I will not wish unto you the ass's ears of Midas, nor to be driven by a poet's verses, as Bubonax was, to hang himself; nor to be rhymed to death, as is said to be done in Ireland; yet thus much curse I must send you in the behalf of all poets; that while you live, you live in love, and never get favour, for lacking skill of a sonnet; and when you die, your memory die from the earth for want of an epitaph.*

Philip Sidney

Okay, so I just skipped 1500 years to get to Sidney's famous "Defense of Poesy" (circa 1580.) It's not that nothing happened in the interim. There was lots of poetry and even more

philosophy. But the concept of the imagination fell by the wayside, or, more accurately, was generally considered a subordinate or middling mental faculty. Aquinus, for example, writing 350 years earlier, sees the imagination as a sort of storehouse for sensory impressions. Bacon, a near contemporary of Sidney, sees it as one of three fundamental, and relatively co-equal, "faculties" of mind, along with memory and reason, its status imbued more with Platonic ambivalence than Longinian flamboyance. It's not until Kant, nearly a century hence, that this pattern begins to budge a bit. Which is right around the time Longinus is being translated into French by Boileau, launched on its way toward the English Romantics.

What I most like about Sidney is that he takes on the philosopher directly in this piece, as well as the historian, those other two archivists of human knowledge, arguing that poetry is the superior repository for what we know, at least in terms of conveying it to others, non-specialists. Beyond that, he suggests that unless philosophers and historians are also poets to some extent, that is, imaginative in their work, their work will be lifeless, even delusory, founded in fantasy rather than truth, or available only for a highly specialized few. More radically, he even implies, in relation to this matter of teachability, that everyone has a native capacity to understand poetic figures and discourses. Those are proto-Romantic ideas proffered well in advance of the great British poets of the late-18th/early-19th century, the ones who will serve as keystones in the middle portions of this book.

I quote his final paragraph because it is such a furious bit of rhetorical flourish, the ultimate in-your-face peroration, declaiming to all that if you want to win at love or be remembered after death, you need to love poetry and learn how to use it. And he does it all in one sentence. I write long, mazy sentences because that's how my head works. I like to write them and like to read them. Sidney's is way out of my league, a sentence only a

great poet could write. Sublime. If you like sentences like that, read some Sidney.

## Poem

In the late 1970s I wrote a long mock-epic series of poems called *Beginning Was* that was my riff off a quote from Claude Levi-Strauss that just happened to catch in my brain like a cotton ball on a hook. He says in his *Introduction to the Works of Marcel Mauss:*

> *Language can only have arisen all at once. . . In the wake of a transformation . . . a shift occurred, from a stage when nothing had meaning to another stage when everything had meaning. (59-60)*

What struck me, and stayed, was the imagined sense of what it would feel like if you had no language, none, and then in an instant had it all. It would be almost like a form of insanity. All that noise and those voices in the head. Cacophonous. Scary. And it would take a very long time to get it under enough control to do at least some of your bidding instead of your doing only its. Each poem in the series takes an historical epoch, places this insane head in it, and explores what it is then, progressively, trying to make of and do with words. It always comes to a bad result.

The poem I chose here is set in the Age of Enlightenment, roughly Sidney's time, that moment when it all seemed to make sense. And then, as is always the case with sense when it settles a bit, it didn't.

## *Locus*

*Like all dreams this could never last.*
*He woke to a world rational as glass.*
*Predictable as clockwork he punched in,*
*settled to the task: He tracked down*
*planets in their paths, greased*
*a brand-new axle for the stars,*
*set right the flywheel of his mind,*
*picked his brains, numbered all his*
*bones. He made himself at home.*

*On his way to lunch he slipped on wet grass.*
*The attractive earth beckoned and he sat.*
*There ought to be a law, he muttered.*
*And there was. He inclined himself*
*to the plain truth and thought: I think*
*I am. He marveled at the leverage*
*this gave, geared down for the long*
*haul downhill, positive his differential*
*would keep him steady on the curves.*

*His lexicon was eloquent and trim,*
*a perfect execution of sentences*
*he pronounced. He catalogued a wilderness*
*of names, climbed a ladder halfway*
*to the moon, tamed a troop of angels*
*to stage a sideshow on a pin.*
*Weather was cool and sunny as a rose.*
*Lovely dreams of dreams slid by*
*his eye. Nothing left to know.*

*Then thick fogs rolled up the shore.*
*Things began to rust. The grease*
*so right for sunlight congealed at night.*
*There was friction in the works.*
*He felt the axle give. A time clock clanged.*

*He punched out with his fist. His flywheel*
*grew eccentric and he shook. Insomnia*
*set in. His nerves were shot. This*
*is a crying shame, he cried. And cried.*

## William Blake

I was link-hopping online recently and got on a William Blake jag, ended up listening to Patti Smith sing William Blake's "The Tyger." She has a great voice of course, musical skill, but I thought the presentation was kind of dirge-like, processional, flattening out all the intense emotion Blake must have been feeling about that tiger, awe, fear, sadness, vexation. Here is his poem:

*Tyger Tyger, burning bright,*
*In the forests of the night;*
*What immortal hand or eye,*
*Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

*In what distant deeps or skies.*
*Burnt the fire of thine eyes?*
*On what wings dare he aspire?*
*What the hand, dare seize the fire?*

*And what shoulder, & what art,*
*Could twist the sinews of thy heart?*
*And when thy heart began to beat,*
*What dread hand? & what dread feet?*

*What the hammer? what the chain,*
*In what furnace was thy brain?*
*What the anvil? what dread grasp,*
*Dare its deadly terrors clasp!*

*When the stars threw down their spears*
*And water'd heaven with their tears:*
*Did he smile his work to see?*
*Did he who made the Lamb make thee?*

*Tyger Tyger burning bright,*
*In the forests of the night:*
*What immortal hand or eye,*
*Dare frame thy fearful symmetry? (24)*

Last fall I got obsessed with Emily Dickinson, one of my longtime favorites, as you know if you read my work. I am in love with her. I was reading her poems every night before I went to bed. They are beautiful and perplexing enough to set the stage for vexing sleep. Just out of the blue, one night watching TV, I started up a conversation with her in my head, based on her "nobody" poem:

*I'm Nobody! Who are you?*
*Are you—Nobody—Too?*
*Then there's a pair of us!*
*Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!*

*How dreary—to be—Somebody!*
*How public—like a Frog—*
*To tell one's name—the livelong June—*
*To an admiring Bog! (47)*

I ended up writing my reply to her, as a song, recorded it and then recorded seven more of her poems as songs, slightly to quite a bit modified to suit my purposes. Anyway, when I heard Patti Smith sing Blake's "song" I thought, you know, I think I can do better than that, get the angst and emotion back in. So I sang it, recorded it, liked it, and picked seven other Blake "songs" to sing in my own voice. Or my own imagined version of his voice.

Because I am in love with Emily Dickinson, we have a kind of late-night-communion capacity, at least via her music and mine. I am not in love with William Blake. But I quite like him. When I think of historical "geniuses" he's one of the first people that enters my head. And far as I am off the charts, he is further, which makes him a kind of hero to me. Well, I think, Blake

made it through his trying life without caving. Maybe I can, too. And at least now, I can add him to my late-night-communion partners, me, my guitar and Big Bad Bill. I almost named the album I made of his songs "Don't Mess with Bill," but that song is nearly as old as I am and I wasn't sure anyone would get it.

Anyway (again), part of that link-hopping led me to a couple of letters Blake wrote in 1799 to a man of means, Dr. John Trusler, who had commissioned him to do some art work. Trusler had a very specific thing in mind that he wanted, and he was quite insistent on it. It was not what Blake envisioned as best for the project. If you know anything about Blake or others like him, including me, that did not bode well for their "partnership." Blake needed to find a way to get this commission off his back. He did that via two letters, which I quote from here, because they have something to say about the imagination, as I'm trying to delineate it here. The first is the shorter, but quite forceful. Here are several key passages:

> *I find more & more that my Style of Designing is a Species by itself & in this which I send you have been compelled by my Genius or Angel to follow where he led. If I were to act otherwise it would not fulfill the purpose for which alone I live . . .*
>
> *I attempted every morning for a fortnight together to follow your Dictate, but when I found my attempts were in vain, resolved to shew an independence which I know will please an Author better than slavishly following the track of another however admirable that track may be. At any rate my Excuse must be: I could not do otherwise, it was out of my power!*
>
> *I cannot previously describe in words what I mean to Design for fear I should Evaporate the Spirit of my Invention. But I hope that none of my Designs will be destitute of Infinite Particulars which will present*

*themselves to the Contemplator. And tho I call them Mine I know that they are not Mine being of the same opinion with Milton when he says that the Muse visits his slumbers & awakes & governs his Song when Morn purples the East, & being also in the predicament of that prophet who says I cannot go beyond the command of the Lord to speak good or bad. (701)*

Here are many of the elements of Blake's belief about the origin and agency of creative enterprise:

1. Imaginative work is individual and unique, "compelled" by a force ("Genius or Angel," inside/outside) that cannot be resisted.
2. It cannot be controlled in its details by an external sponsor (especially an obtuse one).
3. It cannot merely imitate another's work (no matter how great).
4. It cannot be predicted or prescribed, even by the artist himself. Poetic/artistic work belongs to a "muse" in much the same way that a prophet's words belong to God.

That would be yes, yes, yes and yes, to me. I have been asked a couple of times to produce poetic work on spec. It started out awful, it felt awful, and I quit, with predictably unsalutary effects. I'm no Blake, but I can understand his upset.

Apparently, it didn't work. Trusler was as stubborn as Blake, wanted what he was paying for, not what Blake wanted to make. So Blake wrote again, a much longer missive, from which I'll quote sparingly.

*I feel very sorry that your ideas and mine on moral painting differ so much as to have made you angry with me. If I am wrong, I am wrong in good company! . . .*

*You say that I want somebody to elucidate my ideas, but you ought to know that what is grand is necessarily obscure to weak men. That which can be made explicit to an idiot is not worth my care. . .*

*I perceive that your eye is perverted by caricature prints which ought not to abound as much as they do. Fun I love, but too much fun is of all things the most loathesome. Mirth is better than fun, and happiness is better than mirth. . . This world is a world of imagination and vision. I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does not see alike. . . Some see Nature all ridicule and deformity, . . . and some scarce see Nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees. As the eye is formed, such are its powers. . .*

*To engrave after another painter is infinitely more laborious than to engrave one's own inventions. (702-3)*

Same general ideas, with these two additions:

1. He implies that his sponsor is weak, idiotic, perverted and loathesome, probably not the best approach to customer service.

2. He states over and over the relationship between imagination and vision. And he doesn't mean vision in the ordinary sense of the word (I see that table, say), but in its more ecstatic, prophetic sense. He says elsewhere, to explain this, that one should not see with the eyes but through them. Even blind eyes, in such a system, might provide a deeper "vision" than sighted eyes tuned to their lowest frequency.

Again, yes and yes.

A few days later Blake writes to George Cumberland, who apparently recommended him to Trusler. He says:

> *I have made him a Drawing in my best manner [and] he has sent it back with a Letter full of Criticisms . . . How far he Expects to please I cannot tell. But as I cannot paint Dirty rags & old Shoes where I ought to place Naked Beauty and simple ornament. I despair of Ever pleasing one Class of Men—Unfortunately our authors of books are among this Class. How soon we Shall have a change for the better I cannot Prophecy. (703)*

As is so often the case with prophetic souls of Blake's sort, not soon enough.

## Poem

The poem I picked for this section is one I wrote maybe 30 years ago, at a fearsome moment in my own life. It has nothing to do with Blake. But it's kind of scary, like "The Tyger." And it has to do with the powers of imagination to create, not only figuratively but quite literally; to take over from the outside in, for better or worse. It's not only a poem I like, it's a perfect bridge to the "high" Romantics, especially Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whom I'll be getting to soon, an extremist of the imagination. In a good way.

## *Sleight of Hand*

*Let me explain to you*
*that this is not in any manner*
*mysterious, what I am about to do, I mean,*
*right before your eyes.*
*But you must pay close attention:*
*Here is a round bowl*
*into which I pour one liter*
*of distilled water.*
*It is just enough for one of us*
*to survive for one night*
*in the desert.*
*In a few moments I will allow you to decide*
*in which direction you wish me to turn.*
*On the one hand*
*I will simply climb the stairs,*
*take off my clothes and go to sleep.*
*You will find yourself alone here,*
*staring contentedly at one goldfish in a round bowl*
*as it puckers its mouth*
*over and over breathing.*
*On the other hand*
*I will stride directly at you,*
*passing right through*
*everything that stands between us.*
*You will hear nothing*
*but the monotonous sound*
*of my voice warning you*
*over and over*
*that you have gone too far now ever to get back,*
*that to do so you would have to cross*
*both your desert and mine*
*with nothing but one liter of distilled water*
*in a round bowl*
*in which we are both now swimming*
*unable even to breathe.*

# William Wordsworth

*It is the honourable characteristic of Poetry that its materials are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind. The evidence of this fact is to be sought, not in the writings of Critics, but in those of Poets themselves.*

*The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments. They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure. Readers accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and aukwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title. It is desirable that such readers, for their own sakes, should not suffer the solitary word Poetry, a word of very disputed meaning, to stand in the way of their gratification; but that, while they are perusing this book, they should ask themselves if it contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents; and if the answer be favorable to the author's wishes, that they should consent to be pleased in spite of that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision.*

William Wordsworth (47-8)

William Wordsworth is the elder statesman of British Romanticism. In 1798 he teamed up with Samuel Taylor

Coleridge, both quite young, essentially unknowns, to publish one of the most influential books of poetry in English literature, a little book called *Lyrical Ballads,* the poems of which Wordsworth characterized in a very brief and tentative preface, which he called an "advertisement" (about half of which I quote above), as "experiments". They are all of that and more. When most people think of a poem in its most stereotypical sense now, they have in mind something like what these poems are, no longer experiments, but nearly clichés. Wordsworth's preface, brief as it is, lays out a profound critique of the mainstream poetry of his day, which he says is premised on an too-intimate relationship with "criticism," often indistinguishable from it. He actually believes these poems may not be recognizable as poems by his most likely audience, indoctrinated as they are into that sensibility.

The book received a lukewarm reception, which is better, I think, than either author expected, and Wordsworth, emboldened by this, expanded his preface exponentially for the next edition (1800), I mean like maybe 20 times longer. By the next edition (1802), the preface was fully formed in all of it elements, no longer an advertisement but a manifesto that shaped what poetry was to become for the next two or three generations. Or more, depending on how you prefer to read the Modernists' at least partial rebellion against it. There are so many famous sentences in this argument that I don't have space here to document them, sentences that may still ring a bell of familiarity with even the most casual reader of poems. One of them is "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: It takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." (Wordsworth adds the extra "l," maybe conventional back then.) This sounds pretty simple, and often gets translated into an invitation just to "spill your guts." It is nothing of the sort.

He lays out in more detail the complex stages of his process later in the preface to the 1800 edition, this way:

> *I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind and in whatever degree, from various causes is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will upon the whole be in a state of enjoyment. (180)*

So, first you need to go out and acquire an experience that is deeply emotional. Then you need to go away, maybe for years, as is the case with some of his most famous poems, like "Tintern Abbey;" and in solitary "tranquillity" you must "contemplate" it. Then, this emotion, already one stage removed from the original, disappears and a "kindred" one is produced, but gradually, taking some time to evolve. Then and only then do you get that "overflow of powerful feelings," the ones you're having now, not back then, that produces a poem, for which the term "spontaneous" is quite a stretch. I used to tell students all the time, just follow this recipe very carefully. You will get a Romantic-type poem every time.

Wordsworth is the first of his generation to proclaim that in some essential respects we are all poets, gifted with this ability to feel deeply and find language to communicate it. He says:

> *Among the qualities which I have enumerated as principally conducing to form a Poet, is implied nothing differing in kind from other men, but only in degree . . . (178.)*

Then, of course, he goes on to list the qualities that real poets have to define that "degree" of difference, and there are lots of them. He may seem to want in his heart to believe everyone is by nature a poet, but he mostly ends up saying: Leave this to the professionals. Like him. I'm only saying this now because the American Romantics, especially Whitman, are much more generous and democratic in this regard, as I'll show later.

I want primarily here to focus on two short poems from this seminal book, both written by Wordsworth (the authors' names were neither on the book cover nor attached to their respective individual compositions, which says something about what my word "tentative" means above, in relation to this first edition.) The first poem is called "Expostulation and Reply," a conversation between "William" and "Matthew," who have quite divergent view about how best to spend one's time "learning" in this world:

*"Why, William, on that old grey stone,*
*Thus for the length of half a day,*
*Why, William, sit you thus alone,*
*And dream your time away?*

*"Where are your books?--that light bequeathed*
*To Beings else forlorn and blind!*
*Up! up! and drink the spirit breathed*
*from dead men to their kind*

*"You look round on your Mother Earth,*
*As if she for no purpose bore you;*
*As if you were her first-born birth,*
*And none had lived before you!"*

*One morning thus, by Esthwaite lake,*
*When life was sweet, I knew not why,*
*To me my good friend Matthew spake,*
*And thus I made reply:*

*"The eye--it cannot choose but see;*
*We cannot bid the ear be still;*
*Our bodies feel, where'er they be,*
*Against or with our will.*

*"Nor less I deem that there are Powers*
*Which of themselves our minds impress;*
*That we can feed this mind of ours*
*In a wise passiveness.*

*"Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum*
*Of things for ever speaking,*
*That nothing of itself will come,*
*But we must still be seeking?*

*"--Then ask not wherefore, here, alone,*
*Conversing as I may,*
*I sit upon this old grey stone,*
*And dream my time away," (133)*

It may be hard for us to understand this hardline distinction between "books" and "Mother Earth" as reservoirs of knowledge, but it's a big deal to Wordsworth and subsequently becomes similarly so for all the British Romantic poets. To Matthew, William is just a dreamer wasting his time sitting on a stone alone. He should be studying the great books, indenturing himself to the light these "dead men" have "bequeathed" for our enrichment.

William's answer is just as strong: The eye, the ear, our bodies, they are learning machines. Whether we give them full rein or not, they feed the mind in ways that books can't. His "passiveness" he says is not laziness. It is "wise." He will learn more dreaming alone on the rock for half a day, in other words, than any "dead men" could possibly teach him. That is an argument I generally endorse. Why else would I be writing all

these books about nothing more than my walks in the woods? I have, of course, read a lot of books, including Wordsworth's and I've required many students to read it. Clearly he is dead. I often ask students if they think he would disapprove of my forcing them to read his book.

Wordsworth, I know from some of that reading, was not a humble man. Thomas Carlisle, who interviewed him much later, when he was famously iconic, found him to be one of the most arrogant men he had ever encountered. And Thomas Carlisle was no slouch himself in that regard. So I'm guessing he'd make his book required reading for the course on life. And most likely argue for it on the basis of its closeness to nature. In other words, that it is not a "book" in the traditional sense, but more like the language of eyes, ears, and body, one that it is different from other books in "kind and not degree." Who knows, maybe he's right. But even if he's not, he had extraordinary powers of persuasion, so might just pull it off. That's the foundation I'm starting with for Wordsworth. Quiet, meditative time with Nature (capital N, to indicate how the Romantics valorized that term, as way more than just some pleasing trees and pretty scenes) is both how we learn and what produces good poetry, the ultimate discourse for teaching others. I like the cut of his jib on this one.

William reprises his argument with Matthew in another little poem called "The Tables Turned," which is literally that: his critique of Matthew, with an even stronger endorsement for his position:

> *Up! up! my Friend, and quit your books;*
> *Or surely you'll grow double:*
> *Up! up! my Friend, and clear your looks;*
> *Why all this toil and trouble?*

*The sun above the mountain's head,*
*A freshening lustre mellow*
*Through all the long green fields has spread,*
*His first sweet evening yellow.*

*Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:*
*Come, hear the woodland linnet,*
*How sweet his music! on my life,*
*There's more of wisdom in it.*

*And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!*
*He, too, is no mean preacher:*
*Come forth into the light of things,*
*Let Nature be your teacher.*

*She has a world of ready wealth,*
*Our minds and hearts to bless—*
*Spontaneous wisdom breathed by health,*
*Truth breathed by cheerfulness.*

*One impulse from a vernal wood*
*May teach you more of man,*
*Of moral evil and of good,*
*Than all the sages can.*

*Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;*
*Our meddling intellect*
*Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—*
*We murder to dissect.*

*Enough of Science and of Art;*
*Close up those barren leaves;*
*Come forth, and bring with you a heart*
*That watches and receives. (134)*

Yes, quit your books, that dull and endless strife. Listen to the music of the linnet (finch) and the throstle (thrush). Then that

great line: "Let Nature be your teacher." Wealth, health, cheerfulness, knowledge of good and evil, you get that by sitting alone on a stone, not in a library. Or a classroom, which is pretty much the only place Wordsworth gets to hang out these days. I don't think the industrial combine that is the contemporary university would look kindly on awarding credits for this kind of learning. Unless maybe it could charge full fare for it without having to provide a classroom, a building, a teacher, just some stones, a pretty good business model. All those rich families now buying a way into elite schools for their privileged children could save a lot of money. Send the kids out to sit on a stone, pay the school for the credits. Sweet deal all the way around.

And there's that other famous line here: "We murder to dissect," which captures succinctly that other pillar of Romanticism, the vital wholeness of all living things. Unless you apprehend the whole, as a whole, fully alive, on its terms, you won't get the wisdom Mother Earth has to offer. Taking it apart might be a useful strategy for something that is already dead. But not worth taking a life for. This whole idea was poo-pooed dismissively back in the 70s and 80s, as "vitalism," whose primary vehicle was rank sentimentality, the "just spill your guts" model. Lots of readers still think that Wordsworth is in fact a rank sentimentalist, all those tear-jerker poems about poor or infirm people—Goody Blake, Simon Lee, the Mad Mother, a haggard lot—being grievously abused by the Matthews of the world. I don't. I like those poems. I think they are deeply humane. And I like this young Wordsworth a lot better than the Wordsworth he turned into once he got famous. Maybe that says more about me than it does about him. If you want to find out for yourself, you can get this little book for free online and check out some of these early "experiments." It's an easy read.

## Poem

I take my poem for today from the second book I wrote after my wife passed, called *Harvest Moon*, written when I was, as I said earlier, under the sway, for five days, of the actual harvest moon in September 2016. It has to do with knowledge, a few learned trees, a little brook, and it ends with Marilyn Monroe. I think Wordsworth would approve of that.

### *9/16, 2016: I just couldn't stop*

*So this morning I just couldn't stop*
*laughing, I mean couldn't stop.*
*I think it was knowing how now*
*for some reason I happen to know*
*way more than you're supposed*
*to get to know while you're still here,*
*and I'm not sure how it happened,*
*maybe it was "just bad luck,"*
*what that doctor told me*
*when "a couple tough weeks"*
*turned into months and months*
*of misery and I still see his face*
*that half-smile flash frozen*
*into his cheeks hoping I'd*
*laugh instead of lunging at him,*
*throat-throttling , and I don't remember*
*if I laughed, but I'm pretty sure*
*I didn't strangle him or I'd be in more trouble*
*now than I am knowing just this much,*

*and, sure, I could tell you some of it,*
*if you pushed hard enough, thought*
*you could take it, but then, like they say,*
*I'd have to kill, well, at least one of us,*
*and I'd prefer not to have it be you,*

*so I'm off now to the woods,*
*my walk, all those trees,*
*well, they already know*
*all of this, I know, for sure,*
*way more I think, too,*
*so if I happen to start blabbing*
*instead of laughing, at least*
*they won't be like,*
*yikes, Munch's "Scream,"*

*and I'm thinking ahead to the ones*
*I want to walk by today, hoping*
*they'll be where they normally are,*
*which is no sure thing in my woods,*
*that big black cherry, flaky-shingle*
*bark up and down, so charming,*
*like a fairy-tale dollhouse*
*I could walk into for a little kiss*
*and one of us would wake up*
*and the other wouldn't still be a frog,*
*but I can never find the door,*
*and believe me I've walked around*
*and around it lots of times looking*
*and I never, ever find the door,*

*or that monstrous oak right out*
*in the open six feet at the base at least,*
*like a ten story leg, so long*
*I can't see what it belongs to,*
*so I just guess from that huge foot,*
*two-foot toes grasping ground,*
*one side a brontosaurus maybe,*
*head way up there somewhere,*
*munching on, what, who knows*
*and the other side a couple elephants*

*leaning into each other, still asleep*
*leg-locked together, so sweet,*
*and I always pay close attention*
*passing, in case one of them decides*
*to take a quick step and I have to jump*
*out of the way, but not too far, hoping*
*I can get a glimpse of what's been kept*
*secret all these years under that big foot,*

*or the heart-shaped poplar up the hill*
*chain-saw toppled last year,*
*too near the power lines,*
*at least waist high just lying there*
*on its side, all that it knew*
*slowly spewing back to the universe*
*bit by byte by megabyte,*
*terabytes of it still left there on the ground,*
*and I think if I sat with it for the rest*
*of my life and listened close enough*
*I'd overhear a bit of what it now has to*
*give back,*

*but today is my only whole day*
*this week to do absolutely nothing*
*and I'm in a hurry to get on with that*
*so I keep walking toward a voice,*
*a real one I promise, a woman*
*on the phone maybe, just talk-talk-*
*talking, and then the three of them*
*walk up single file on the one-lane path,*
*that fluffy poodle-doodle dog up front*
*then her, then him, her husband, had to be,*
*and I can't tell if she's talking to him*
*or the dog and what does it matter*
*anyway, either way it's all still love,*
*and tomorrow maybe he'll be up front*
*hearing what's rushing up toward*

*the back of his head from her, and she says*
*to me, don't worry he wouldn't hurt*
*anyone, and I assume she's talking about*
*the dog, though I can tell instantly*
*(I am that good at this, really)*
*that the guy wouldn't either, just happy*
*to be out walking today with these two,*

*and then the little "bridge,"*
*hardly a bridge, two steps long,*
*the tiny "brook" running under it,*
*hardly a brook, two steps wide,*
*heady today with yesterday's rain*
*going over the rocks with a hard*
*"glug, glug," like pouring a two-liter*
*bottle of coke into the sink fast*
*because it's too flat to drink*

*and I know right then that this poem*
*is over, all I have to say today,*
*down the drain or under the bridge,*
*whatever, even though you waited*
*all this way thinking you'd get to know*
*something you don't already know,*
*not just glug, glug, glug, glug, gone . . .*

*except on the drive home,*
*a big truck I'm following, on the back door,*
*a ten-foot, full color bottle of coke,*
*not the two-liter job like your fat uncle*
*in too-tight pants but the Marilyn Monroe*
*one (yes, I am that old) with the waist*
*you just want to put your arm around*
*for a long, slow dance all the way home,*
*all those dew-drops on the dark glass*
*like maybe her voice would be,*

*whispering into your ear, I mean my ear,*
*something that means nothing*
*and everything all at the same time,*
*one breathful of it carrying more*
*than I or all those trees*
*could even hope to know, now or ever,*
*and the slogan high up on the right side:*

*Love it!*
*Again.*
*And again.*

*OK. I will. I will. Soon as I get home.*
*Can't wait. Thanks.*

## Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Coleridge, as anyone who knows me knows, is my favorite thinker on matters of this sort. His definition of the imagination is probably the most famous of any. It juts up like a little crystalline jewel in the middle of his long, mostly turgid book, the *Biographia Literaria:*

> *The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. (Bio, Ch. 13)*

Here's what I said about this in *This Fall*:

> This is the most exorbitant definition of the imagination I'm familiar with, and it comes out of nowhere in his argument. He's been trying to get to it for pages, chapters, the long Kant-like drudgery of his foundational thinking, striving, grappling its way toward where I'm sure he knew well in advance he wanted to get. Just before he announces the above proclamation, he clearly reached an impasse and knew it. Most theorists at that point would likely just cover over the huge chasm from one paragraph to the next with an authoritative "thus" or "therefore." I do it all the time. No one ever notices. Coleridge, to his everlasting credit, doesn't do that. I think it's actually because he believes that we, his readers, are smart enough to see all the steps that are missing, which we are not, or at least I'm not. I would have trusted him, or been enough carried away by the fervor of his argument to overlook this crucial apostrophic moment. Coleridge does here the

> most charming thing: He inserts a letter from a friend that, basically, warns him not to publish that portion of the argument because it's both incomprehensible and inflammatory. His reputation will be marred. So, out of deference to his wise reader, he complies. The letter of course, we know now, was one Coleridge invented himself, and it's a wonderful bit of ironically deceptive rhetorical flourish. At least to me. Other readers might be less generous. I think it's a gas. (30)

What I like about his definition is its simultaneous extremity and simplicity: Our imagination is the repetition in our finite minds of the infinite power of creation we attribute to gods, in the Biblical mode here as the originary I AM. It is, in other words, a very normal kind of creative perception, the kind I've been talking about all along here: We look out and create a world. We do it all the time. It is whole, luminous, residential, real. Okay, so the gods have the power to make something from nothing, to look out imaginatively and actually bring a material world into being. But, on our much smaller scale, so do we. We make a world of those already created things, give them meaning, bring them into the human equivalent of being.

If we want to make art of that, then we use what he calls "the secondary Imagination,"

> *the echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and unify. (Bio, ch. 13.)*

Simple as that. We make art out of our materials in the same way we make a world with our perceptions. No mumbo jumbo, no mind-bending circumlocutions (which Coleridge is capable of

and does quite often in this book, especially in the long, tortuous build-up to this definition.) That process may be a "struggle,' but it does "recreate," "idealise and unify," just as our perceptual systems do with the world proffered to us by the gods.

There is no better depiction of this power than in the closing stanza of "Kubla Khan," the would-be epic poem that never got written because Coleridge's laudanum-induced vision was intruded upon by "the man from Porlock," who knocked at his door, thereby distracting him. Or at least that's what he says. He could have invented that guy, too, to justify his never getting far with this poem. Although by "not getting far," I mean he ended up creating one of the greatest poems in the English language, which is a good index to how different Coleridge's standards are from mine, say. If I got that poem, I wouldn't be trying to explain why it wasn't longer and better. In any case, this man from Porlock breaks Coleridge's spell and, after he leaves I assume, Coleridge finished the poem this way:

*A damsel with a dulcimer*
*In a vision once I saw:*
*It was an Abyssinian maid*
*And on her dulcimer she played,*
*Singing of Mount Abora.*
*Could I revive within me*
*Her symphony and song,*
*To such a deep delight 'twould win me,*
*That with music loud and long,*
*I would build that dome in air,*
*That sunny dome! those caves of ice!*
*And all who heard should see them there,*
*And all should cry, Beware! Beware!*
*His flashing eyes, his floating hair!*
*Weave a circle round him thrice,*
*And close your eyes with holy dread*
*For he on honey-dew hath fed,*
*And drunk the milk of Paradise. (Works, 547)*

Every time I taught Coleridge, I read this stanza aloud to give a sense of what Coleridge believes is possible with imaginative engagement, and not just for him, for any of us, if we can initiate or recover the beautiful song that accompanies such "visions." We, too, could "build that dome in air/ That sunny dome, those caves of ice," and not just a figment for ourselves, but tangible enough for "all" to "see them there," like for real, up there in empty air. Wow, that's amazing to think about: Build them for real! Afraid as others might be of that sudden creation, thinking something otherworldly must be afoot, they would still know instinctively that it was good, godly, a work of inspiration, which is exactly what we have in common with the gods, maybe their way of breathing Being into being through us. Socrates might be a little put off by Coleridge's outlandishness, but I think he would ultimately like this legendarily garrulous guy as much as I do.

One of the other terms that was a keystone of Romantic poetics is "association." That may seem like a simplistic, even trivial mechanism in our day, but it was not so at that historical moment. It offered a new way of accounting for what poetry was and could do. Wordsworth uses the term multiple times in his famous "Preface," having simply absorbed it from Coleridge, I'm sure. Coleridge, who actually read David Hartley's seminal work on this mental tool, which is how it came into currency back then, relies on it heavily to jog his thinking toward his famous definition of imagination, though he has to abandon Hartley's highly deterministic system very early in that process to get there.

One of my favorite Coleridge poems is "Frost at Midnight," a poem he wrote in a dim room, late-winter/spring, right around the time of year I'm writing this, with his infant child sleeping beside him, whom he had named Hartley after his mentor. Here is a redacted version of what I wrote about that poem in *This Fall*.

It opens this way:

> *The Frost performs its secret ministry,*
> *Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry*
> *Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.*
> *The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,*
> *Have left me to that solitude, which suits*
> *Abstruser musings: save that at my side*
> *My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.*

What follows is a series of "associations" initiated by this moment. Every time I read this poem I can't help but see it as a literal enactment of David Hartley's (or at least Coleridge's Hartley's) associative process, which proposes that there are actual "vibrations" in the brain that bring about these kinds of creative connections. The poem starts outside with the frost, then moves transmissively, via an owlet's cry, back inside the cottage, to little Hartley, to Coleridge, meditating there in the silence until all the outside world is absent, except for the little flame fluttering on his fireplace grate:

> *. . . the thin blue flame*
> *Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;*
> *Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,*
> *Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.*

That perception vibrates his mood and his memory, jogging him back to his lonely school days, watching that same "fluttering stranger" (a metaphor back then for the little flame.) An elaborate series of associated memories ensues, concluding with his poignant hope that some actual human "stranger" he knows ("townsman, aunt or sister more beloved") might show up at the door to rescue him from his solitary work. This vibrates him instantly back to himself in that room with his son, for whom he has such loving and elaborate high hopes, thoughts that

could never have issued forth had he not first been transported back to his own lonely childhood moment at school. This feeling clarifies and emerges into his poignant peroration, an address to his child, then returns to the outside world, and, finally, to the frost, this way:

> *Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,*
> *Whether the summer clothe the general earth*
> *With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing*
> *Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch*
> *Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch*
> *Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall*
> *Heard only in the trances of the blast,*
> *Or if the secret ministry of frost*
> *Shall hang them up in silent icicles,*
> *Quietly shining to the quiet Moon. (Works, 43)*

The lovely circuit of associations closes where it opened, but so much more enriched, as is always the case with Coleridge, by its path of transit, in this case the "secret ministry of the frost" having revealed at least a few of its beautiful secrets. (32-35)

There is no poet I know who is better at this kind of circularity: an opening perception, a long meditation with many unexpected connections, and a return to that initial image, deeply enriched, laden with new meaning, from having been followed through the full circuit of those "associations." Coleridge calls these poems "conversation poems." In part that suggests something about their "voice," casual, open. But at a deeper level it suggests the sort of intimate connection he can establish and maintain with what's out there, what's in his mind, and with his reader. Every time I finish this poem I feel both that he has been conversing with me, and that he is listening all the while he speaks. That is what the imagination makes possible, all those things, including talking with someone hundreds of years hence as if she is right there in the room with you.

## Poem

I picked this poem, which I wrote in the mid-90s, because, like Coleridge's, it is set at a seasonal transition and in the context of the nearbyness of my children. And it says something about what one can build in the air out of nothing with just words, even if those words never become the poem you're actually writing:

*Winter Solstice*

*(with some fragments from Empedocles)*

*a roomful of pure moonlight*
*oozes over every*
*pore of my body*
*bathes me as if I were a child*
*peals of his laughter leak*
*like helium I hear*
*a little-boy voice squeak*
*parts of his heart healing . . .*

*he says to me:*
*"shelter . . .*
*a silent*
*heart . . ."*
*he says to me:*
*"love . . .*
*tenacious*
*love . . ."*
*he says to me:*
*"there . . .*
*it is fixed*
*forever . . ."*

*night after night I sit here*
*silent in the dark thinking*
*I am closer than ever now*
*to the last great nothing*
*these dreams keep leaving*
*my children build heavens*
*I try . . .*

*tonight I will hold myself*
*in my own warm arms*
*then let them come apart*
*riffle through pages scattered*
*around me on the floor*
*lift them up in big bunches*
*how slowly they float*
*back down, shining*
*with borrowed light*
*tonight I will write myself*
*a love poem*
*it will begin with the line*
*"a roomful of pure moonlight"*
*but it is not this poem*
*this poem is only*
*to help me*
*forget*
*what you thought*
*I was trying to say . . .*

## Percy Bysshe Shelley

[I wrote quite extensively on Shelley's poetic theory in *This Fall* (pp. 26-30) so I'm just going to borrow from that material, making whatever changes seem necessary in this new context]

I was just looking again at a couple of Shelley poems I know well and I happened to focus on the birds that make those poems work. One is Shelley's "To a Skylark," published in 1820, an astonishing *tour de force* of Romantic figuration. Here is the first stanza:

> *Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!*
> *Bird thou never wert,*
> *That from Heaven, or near it,*
> *Pourest thy full heart*
> *In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.*

It struck me for the first time how odd this assertion is, telling this bird that it was never a bird! All of a sudden, the skylark is entirely disenfranchised from his own birddom, at the poet's behest, reduced only to its song wafting down from the clouds. I suspect there is a technical name for this specific kind of figuration, but I don't know exactly what it is, or care enough to look it up. It is the act of radical disembodiment that interests me here. And what Shelley does with it in the rest of the poem, the array of similes he uses to re-fill the empty space his absent skylark creates for him, transforming the spectral song into the apotheosis of poetic inspiration, slowly at first, in the opening stanzas: "Like an unbodied joy whose race has just begun . .." or "Like a star of Heaven/In the broad day-light." Then cascadingly:

> *Like a high-born maiden*
> *In a palace-tower,*

*Soothing her love-laden*
*Soul in secret hour*
*With music sweet as love, which overflow her bower:*

*Like a glow-worm golden*
*In a dell of dew,*
*Scattering unbeholden*
*Its aerial hue*
*Among the flowers and grass, which screen it from the view:*

*Like a rose embower'd*
*In its own green leaves*
*By warm winds deflower'd,*
*Till the scent it gives*
*Makes faint with too much sweet those heavy-winged thieves.*

*Like a Poet hidden*
*In the light of thought,*
*Singing hymns unbidden,*
*Till the world is wrought*
*To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not.*

Note that in each case, there is a "thing" there, at the base of the comparison, but it's never quite tangible, embodied; it's always barely evanescent: the rainbow clouds, the hidden poet, the tower-ensconced maiden, the screened glow-work, the scented rose. Nothing solid anywhere, but still filled to the full. That's impressive. The rest of the poem then uses this re-figured bird-base to amp up things like Wordsworth's "Let nature be your teacher" and Coleridge's "damsel with a dulcimer" to their maximum pedagogical volume, what the poet aspires to be but can never even approach becoming. That's very cool, I think, at the material level of the poem, this bird that is not a bird, these things that are no longer things, enspiriting in the most majestic ways, haunting in the most

alluring ways, the similarly disembodied figure of the poet who can only listen, listen:

*We look before and after,*
*And pine for what is not:*
*Our sincerest laughter*
*With some pain is fraught;*
*Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.*

*Yet if we could scorn*
*Hate, and pride, and fear;*
*If we were things born*
*Not to shed a tear,*
*I know not how thy joy we ever should come near.*

*Better than all measures*
*Of delightful sound,*
*Better than all treasures*
*That in books are found,*
*Thy skill to poet were, thou scorner of the ground!*

*Teach me half the gladness*
*That thy brain must know,*
*Such harmonious madness*
*From my lips would flow*
*The world should listen then, as I am listening now.*

(poetryfoundation.org)

Shelley wrote this poem right around the time he wrote his hyper-drive starship of "A Defence of Poetry," the apogee, in my mind, of Romantic valorization of the power and force of both the poet, as a cultural figure, and poetry as a mode of discourse. Here are a few passages, just to give you a flavor of Shelley's ecstatic paean. My favorite one comes about halfway in, the ultimate phallic analogy for verbal invention: "Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the

scabbard that would contain it." Yikes! But there are many others, more extended and wonderous:

*Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought; it is that from which all spring, and that which adorns all; and that which, if blighted, denies the fruit and the seed, and withholds from the barren world the nourishment and the succession of the scions of the tree of life.*

. . .

*Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes.*

. . .

*Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.*

(poetryfoundation.org)

Wow! Can't go much farther out there than that. Shelley doesn't seem to be very widely read or admired these days. I've come to enjoy and respect his work more over the years, but there is something oddly "cold" in the overwhelming "heat" of his images, a glassy, almost dispassionate, beauty to the poetic surface, hard to penetrate, reminding me of Walter Pater's famous dictum: "To burn always with this hard gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life." That is Shelley exactly, I think, burning, burning, yes, but with gemlike flames.

## Poem

I happened upon this poem in an old e-file while I was looking for another poem. It's one of the very first poems I wrote with an eye toward publication, so that's about 50 years ago. It never landed that way, but I still like it, maybe more now than I did then, to be honest. And, like Shelley's, it's about a bird, one I used to see often, always with delight and amazement out in the country when I was a kid.

*Redwing Blackbird*

*The switchblade wind is*
*quick enough to play*
*tricks with me*
*makes me think back*
*faster than all these*
*flakes flicking past me*
*like blurs of summer*
*sunlight on the lake*
*until I am wading*

*knee-deep in pickerel-*
*weed snaking my way*
*toward cattails where*
*blackbirds sit with*
*quarter-moon beaks*
*tucked beneath wing-*
*blades splashed red*
*at the hinges--such*
*a red that does not*
*resemble the sun going*
*up or the sun coming*
*down or the blood*
*around any wound*
*or gashes of peonies*
*cut into thin air or*
*anything birdlike and*
*fragile as feather only*
*a splash of red on*
*all that astonishing*
*black and I bask*
*in that healing heat*
*while the switchblade*
*wind cuts deep to*
*a dream of its own.*

# Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson is America's Wordsworth, the progenitor of a poetic movement that spanned a couple of generations, flying most often under the flag of "transcendentalism," first coined by a critic in a pejorative sense, and the sponsor, maybe not entirely intentionally, of its greatest voice, Walt Whitman. Whenever I taught Emerson in relation to poetics, especially at the entry level, where students are likely to be unfamiliar with his actual work, maybe having heard of him in relation to transcendentalism, I prefer to use his essay "The American Scholar" rather than, say, a more obvious choice, "The Poet," an equally powerful argument on behalf of imaginative creation.

"The American Scholar" originated with a talk Emerson was invited to deliver before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard College in 1837, his first "book," which we now read as an essay, *Nature,* having been published the previous year. So he's still relatively young and relatively unknown. Events of that sort, I know from my experience in the academy, tend to be ceremonial, celebratory, what Martin Heidegger calls, dismissively, a century later, "commemorative," rather than opportunities to provoke real thinking. I'm sure Emerson knew this. But he chose to do the second thing instead of what is expected, building "thinking" into the very fabric of his talk via the elaborate figure of what he calls "Man Thinking," his way of naming the genuine intellectual, in or out of the academy.

I always read aloud, before I even assigned the text, the first paragraph of this essay, just to give a sense of how brave and dynamic Emerson is in this endeavor. I asked everyone to imagine the audience, all men of stature and importance in their day, most older, maybe much older, all expecting to be honored and edified by their new recruit. Emerson starts off on the right tone in that regard:

*Mr. President and Gentlemen,*

*I greet you on the re-commencement of our literary year. Our anniversary is one of hope, and, perhaps, not enough of labor. We do not meet for games of strength or skill, for the recitation of histories, tragedies, and odes, like the ancient Greeks; for parliaments of love and poesy, like the Troubadours; nor for the advancement of science, like our contemporaries in the British and European capitals. (43)*

Then he takes a sharp turn:

*Thus far, our holiday has been simply a friendly sign of the survival of the love of letters amongst a people too busy to give to letters any more. As such, it is precious as the sign of an indestructible instinct. Perhaps the time is already come, when it ought to be, and will be, something else; when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids, and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. (43)*

Okay, he's saying, via "simply," none of this "friendly sign" stuff to assuage us because others are "too busy" to listen to what we care about. That's precious but pointless. Then the artillery comes out, "the sluggard intellect of this continent," like, for example, you guys sitting here under your "iron lids" championing "mechanical skill." Yikes! I'm guessing he got their attention. Not in a good way. He goes on:

*Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. (43)*

Yes, their dependence, apprenticeship, discipleship to "the learning of other lands" (meaning European, primarily), recycling "the sere remains of foreign harvests," instead of learning how to "sing themselves." Yikes again! Then he lays out his ambition for this talk:

> *Who can doubt, that poetry will revive and lead in a new age, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand years?*
>
> *In this hope, I accept the topic which not only usage, but the nature of our association, seem to prescribe to this day, — the AMERICAN SCHOLAR. Year by year, we come up hither to read one more chapter of his biography. Let us inquire what light new days and events have thrown on his character, and his hopes. (43)*

Okay, so poetry is the solution to this, not most likely what his eminent audience would be expecting to hear— poetry, nice for a quiet evening, not much good for the business of the world. And poetry is, in his view, not a pastime but a mode of scholarship, the most essential one. That's pretty incredible right there. His audience may not have been sanguine, but I bet their ears perked up, if only to find all the ways they might want to dismantle his impudent argument.

Poetry as the apex discourse and imagination as the apex mental faculty are ideas founded in the British Romantic movement, championed by Wordsworth and Coleridge forty years before Emerson gave this talk. So what makes what he has to offer new, and not simply, along the lines of his complaint, derivative from "foreign harvests?" Well, quite a lot really, things that are distinctively American and find their originary spokesman, at least in relation to poetics and intellection, in Emerson.

I'll start with the big one, "Nature," the title of the very long essay that got him this speaking gig (181-225), and a term Emerson uses repeatedly in his work. For Emerson, Nature has four pillars: Commodity, Beauty, Language and Discipline. I'll skip Beauty because that is basically Wordsworthian in its ambitions and proportions, though Emerson adds a provocative "intellectual" component to it (12.) But the other three supplement British Romanticism in interesting ways, making Emerson's concept considerably more comprehensive than Wordsworth's.

Firstly, when Wordsworth talks about nature, it's almost always in relation to landscapes that have not been commodified by human hands and our encounters with it are almost always solitary, even if we are with someone else. Emerson is more inclusive, incorporating those elements of nature that have "uses" for us. Two of his pillars, "Commodity" and "Language" seem to me to fall in this category.

"Commodity," he says, "although low," "is perfect in its kind and is the only use of nature which all men apprehend" (7). And "the useful arts are reproductions or new combinations by the wit of man, of the same natural benefactors" (8). Commodity is the relationship with nature that we share in common, adding a communal, social aspect to even the greatest artist's relationship with both nature and his audience. So Emerson is in that respect, I would argue, closer to Socrates the star-gazer than Wordsworth the stone-sitter. That's a big addition, in many respects distinctively American, in its relation to things "democratic" in particular. And it mitigates the harsh city/country binary that afflicts British Romanticism, making it sometimes seem haplessly anti-industrial and hopelessly nostalgic.

Emerson also has a considerably more sophisticated theory of language than Wordsworth does, one prefiguring the American "pragmatists," Charles Sanders Pierce, John Dewey, and William James, who came along and amplified some of his ideas a

generation later. For Emerson, "words are signs of natural facts," (13) "that convey a spiritual import" (14). This brings immediate "experience" and the "universal soul" (14) much more intimately into confluence in moments of creation. Art may benefit from meditation, but it doesn't necessarily require all of those steps back and away from the moment that Wordsworth scripts out so meticulously. And in terms of poetry, it prefers to render nature, in all of its aspects, including the social, through very specific details rather than relying on vaguer "emotions" for animation.

Emerson doesn't insist on the "recollection in tranquillity" part of Wordsworth's process. Encounters with nature, in all its myriad aspects, are direct, immediate. They can and should initiate arrays of extrinsic connections that lead, ideally, to an awareness of the whole of the universe, which is correspondent to the human soul. To see the difference in practice, read Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," or a few pages of Shelley's poems, where everything is absent in some way; then read Whitman, where everything is fully present. Whitman becomes, by this means, the foundation for a poetic tradition in what William Carlos Williams will later call "the American grain." And Whitman got his call from reading Emerson.

"Discipline" allows Emerson to bring "the understanding of intellectual truths" (19) into the field of play. For Wordsworth, trying his best to counter what he felt was the excessive intellection of the previous generation, truth is best encountered via emotion, a "wise passiveness." In his speech, Emerson's assigns the "scholar" as the "designated intellect" for the cultural system in which there are all kinds of other useful specialists. He calls on each man in this group before him not, though, to be a mere "thinker," self-contained, preoccupied with status and fame, or his own little bailiwick; but to be "Man Thinking," (44) a grander, more nobly generic profession, working always with some humility on behalf of the whole.

He names three "influences upon the mind" (44) that need to be properly coordinated to accomplish this. The most important is Nature, in the broader Emersonian sense I have outlined here. The second is "the mind of the Past," (46) whose primary vehicle is books. Again, Emerson has a considerably more complex approach to the nature/books conundrum than the one Wordsworth details in the William/Matthew argument. For Emerson, "the theory of books is noble," "transmuting life into truth." So books are good. "Yet hence," he says, "arises a grave mischief." Too great a devotion to the "perfect" "hero" who wrote each book, and "the book becomes noxious: the guide a tyrant." "Hence, instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookworm," the sort of "book-learned class" that is likely well represented in his audience (46-47). Emerson goes on to detail "a right way of reading," which he calls "creative reading," (48) the first time to my knowledge reading has assumed the status of writing in that regard, as an active, imaginative enterprise, a way of making. So Emerson is not at all afflicted by Wordsworth's contradiction about whether one should be reading his books. Emerson is clearly learned and promotes learnedness. And he would be happy to have you read his books. It's what you do with them that makes the difference.

That gets him to the third "influence" on the mind of Man Thinking: Action. Basically, Emerson says the point of reading is not to acquire a mastery of things past, it is to inspire something new, something now, to render your book not regurgitate theirs. Make what you read your own and then go make your own books for others to read. That's the charge Whitman took off and ran with, so I'll save further discussion of that for the next inter-chapter. The point I want to make is that Man Thinking is not solely contemplative. He must act, too. And get out into the world to do it, once again, testimony to the importance of the social sphere in Emerson's system:

> *The world, this shadow of the soul, or other me, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my*

*thoughts and make me acquainted with myself. I run eagerly into the resounding tumult. (49)*

Yes, the resounding tumult. Where he is not likely to run into Wordsworth! Thinking, for Emerson, is a mode of doing. It is not sitting on a stone. "Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary" (51). And, right before this sentence, one of my favorite in all of Emerson's work, though it is not necessarily pertinent here: "Character is higher than intellect" (51). This to an audience of intellectuals. Good for you, Ralph!

One further point, an arguable one. For the most part, Emerson seems to assign "thinking" to this scholarly class, like the men sitting there. But over and over in this piece, he implies that "thinking" is the one function we all share in common. To my way of reading, he says we are all "(wo)men thinking," most especially important in a democracy, where we can't afford to entirely trust specialists to do our thinking for us. Thinking is an innate and endemic human function. And to turn briefly to his essay "The Poet:" If you want to trust anyone for guidance along the way, trust the poet, who is fully "representative," who "stands among partial men for the complete man" (288), is both capable of and properly inspired enough to tell us the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

What a remarkable legacy to leave us, a truly American poetics. No wonder Whitman loved his work, brought that legacy fully into being about 20 years later. No wonder Emerson loved Whitman's work, even if he couldn't quite identify it as poetry, calling it "wit and wisdom" in the letter he wrote Whitman after the publication, in 1855, of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass,* which was not otherwise well-received, the letter Whitman used to launch his second edition. Emerson knew this was a book from its own time and for the future, not from the past or for the past. He was a man thinking!

## Poem

I think I'll end this with one of Emerson's poems. Emerson's own poems, and he wrote a lot of them, are not very interesting to me, strained and formal, by contrast with his prose, which is dense but rich, pellucid. If you want to read Emerson's real poetry, I say read the essays. You can judge for yourself of course. But don't finalize your judgment until you read some Whitman, who is, to me at least, the poet Emerson imagined when he wrote those great essays. Then write your own poems. Here for example is the poem he uses to preface "The Poet:"

*A moody child and wildly wise*
*Pursued the game with joyful eyes,*
*Which chose, like meteors, their way,*
*And rived the dark with private ray:*
*They overleapt the horizon's edge,*
*Searched with Apollo's privilege;*
*Through man, and woman, and sea, and star,*
*Saw the dance of nature forward far;*
*Through worlds, and races, and terms, and times,*
*Saw musical order, and pairing rhymes.*

*Olympian bards who sung*
*Divine ideas below,*
*Which always find us young,*
*And always keep us so. (287)*

## Walt Whitman

*The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me—*
*he complains of my gab and loitering.*
*I too am not a bit tamed—I too am untranslatable;*
*I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.*

Walt Whitman (96)

I'm not sure exactly what I want to do with Whitman here. Not because I don't have a lot to say, but because there is just so much to love about his inspiring approach to imaginative creation, more than one of these mini-essays can contain. I could just paste in his preface to *Leaves of Grass*, which is breathtaking, I mean literally, you will lose your breath reading the voluminous, clipped, ecstatic sentences flowing like rushing waters over and into others, obviously composed in a state of "godly possession" that even Socrates would find staggering. But it is way too long. Or ask you to read his "barbaric yawp" of a poem, "Song of Myself," in its original 1855 version, all that "gab and loitering," so electric, before it got "tamed" "a bit" into numbered parts as he expanded and republished his evolving book under the same title for the rest of his life, leaving finally a volume thick as most Bibles. But that, too, like everything Whitman wrote, is very long and ultimately "untranslatable," at least into a container of this sort.

So I'm going to focus on just one thing, the relationship he creates with his reader, so personal, so intimate, on the basis of which he genuinely carries out his invocation to you to use his book not simply to grasp his vision but to inspire one of your own. All imaginative acts involve or imply a reader, of course, even if it is only oneself, and writers have approached this matter from all angles along the way. For example, as I've been saying, the Romantics, British and American, talked about their

desire to establish a co-equal relationship with their readers, professed their belief that all of us are, fundamentally, poets, because language itself is fundamentally poetic, figurative to its core, thus allowing for face to face encounters on that terrain. Then they start to place conditions or limits on that shared capacity, taking this piece back, or out, contracting the promise, until, well, only the "real" poet is left to write "real" poems. Wordsworth does it a lot, Shelley does it less, Emerson does it least. But they do it. Whitman does not. He makes that promise and then he keeps it. That is his greatest charm to me.

Basically, I'll just quote some passages from "Song of Myself," maybe my favorite all-time poem, to show how he does this and with what effect. The poem opens this way:

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself*
*And what I assume you shall assume*
*For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (28)*

Wow! So there is an "I" and a "you" here, a poet and his reader, configured together right off the bat. This is a conversation in which he may not be able to hear your side specifically, but as he says later he wants you "to listen to all sides and filter them from your self." This is an opening hint toward some of the "multitudes" Whitman aspires to "contain" in the poem. There is him, with his "me" and "myself" and you with your "you" and "your self," all co-equal partners in the enterprise. Other poets do this, too, maybe not as assertively, but they invite "you" in. Not one of them though announces an atom-for-atom exchange between the two parties involved. That is so outlandish as a first move you almost want to stop reading, like this guy is nuts. Don't. He fulfills this ambition in the most generous, gentle way you can imagine.

And he gives everything of himself to this interaction, body and soul, flesh and spirit, all of it, a sensual, even erotic energy that is intoxicating. Like here:

*Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes,*
*I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,*
*The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.*
*The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,*
*It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,*
*I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,*
*I am mad for it to be in contact with me. (28)*

The atmosphere is in his mouth forever, he is in love it, mad to be in contact with it! Again, wow! I have fallen in love with almost anything you can think of at one time or another. But to fall in love with the odorless air, well that is something that remains an aspiration. I would never even have thought of it had it not been for these lines. Then he lays the groundwork for how things are going to go in the conversation he has started:

*Have you reckoned a thousand acres much:*
*Have you reckoned the earth much?*
*Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?*
*Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?*
*Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,*
*You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)*
*You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,*
*You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,*
*You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self. (29)*

Okay, maybe the first part sounds like a crass power move, as in "you think you know stuff, but you don't know crap. Listen to

me!" But then he clears the field, or the air, or whatever. The one left doing all the listening and filtering is not him, it's you, not through his eyes, but yours. That is an impressive sleight of hand to be sure, to assert himself into the conversation in such a way without pre-occupying the readerly space of the "you" he is in communion with.

I think one of the ways he maintains such a decentered authority is, oddly, by overloading his poem with details, those "catalogues" he was renowned for, has no equal for, not even a close competitor, endless lists of things that both sound Biblical in style and are Biblical in proportions; and all those amazing stories, historical, mythical, imagined, fully peopled with every kind of person, place or thing you can imagine, the "I" of the poem right there in the midst of them, telling them as if they are happening now. These go on for pages and pages and reading them becomes addictive, at least for me, a desire to go faster and faster, to absorb, consume, huge gulps at once, then more, like trying to swallow the ocean, which creates a thirst while it slakes it. You just can't stop. And neither can he. I love his swagger, his aplomb, his coyness, his bombast, all of it, incomparable. I can't fully render that propulsive element of the poem here without adding more pages than I can possibly print. Just read, with speed, some of these catalogues and see for yourself whether he wins you over. At least give him a chance.

Then he goes on, telling you something about who he is (not by his actual name, which doesn't come until later in the poem, the only place anywhere in this first edition, including the cover an title page, where Whitman's name appears, and even then it's kind of an afterthought.) This is my favorite section of the poem, so I'm going to quote it all, even though most of it doesn't apply directly to my limited ambition here:

*Trippers and askers surround me,*
*People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city I live in, or the nation,*

*The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors*
*old and new,*
*My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,*
*The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,*
*The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss*
*or lack of money, or depressions or exaltations,*
*Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news,*
*the fitful events;*
*These come to me days and nights and go from me again*
*But they are not the Me myself.*
*Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,*
*Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary*
*Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable*
*certain rest,*
*Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next*
*Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.*
*Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog*
*with linguists and contenders,*
*I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait. (70)*

Who wouldn't want to listen to and talk with a man like that? He goes on to describe his relationship with his soul, with God, with the child who asks about the grass, with death, and then enters into a kind of trance where he identifies with every specific kind of person you can imagine: old, young, Black, White, Native, men, women, children, gay, straight, etc. And things: animals, plants, minerals, stones, everything. There are pages and pages of this, long catalogues, astonishingly moving and unique. He tells their stories, stands in their places, comes into a seemingly impossible intimacy with them. My favorite is this one:

> *I find I incorporate gneiss and coal and long-threaded moss*
> *And fruits and grains and esculent roots,*
> *And am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over,*
> *And have distanced what is behind me for good reasons,*
> *And call any thing close again when I desire it. (62)*

I always imagine him here as a large, sticky ball of chewing gum rolling around glomming up anything it comes in contact with, like a cartoon, all these animals and birds poking out everywhere, wondering what the hell is going on. And here is another I really like:

*I think I could turn and live awhile with the animals,*
*they are so placid and self-contained,*
*I stand and look at them sometimes half the day long.*

*They do not sweat and whine about their condition,*
*They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,*
*Not one is dissatisfied . . . . not one is demented with the mania of owning things,*
*Not one kneels to another nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,*
*Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth. (63)*

There is a quiet and winning humility to this that I just can't resist. Whitman had a reputation for the mental instability that ran in his family and has been subjected to almost every form of indignity in that regard that critics can come up with, armed with the artillery of subsequent psychological theories and jargon. Right here, he sounds to me like the sanest head in the room. If I ever have to exchange atoms with someone, let it be him.

During all of this cataloguing, and there is lots and lots of it, page after page, he still stops from time to time to talk with "you," get the connection re-established, as here:

> *Do you guess I have some intricate purpose*
> *Well I have . . . . for the April rain has, and the mica on the side of a rock has.*
>
> *Do you take it I would astonish?*
> *Does the daylight astonish? or the early redstart*

*twittering through the woods?*
*Do I astonish more than they?*

*This hour I tell things in confidence,*
*I might not tell everybody but I will tell you. (48)*

Or here:

*Writing and talking do not prove me,*
*I carry the plenum of proof and everything else in my face,*
*With the hush of my lips I confound the topmost skeptic,*

*I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen,*
*And accrue what I hear to myself . . . . and let sounds*
*contribute toward me. (58)*

He is present then, as if bodily, with people on their death beds, in their wedding chambers, on the underground railroad, in the fields, at sea, in battle, everywhere, the ultimate voyeur. And his presence is so vivid it seems unmediated. "I am the man," he says, "I suffered ... I was there." This, too, goes on for pages until his own identity starts to come unraveled, first in this scene, reminiscent of Parmenides' young man flying into the heavens on his flaming chariot to meet the Goddess:

*Speeding through space . . . . speeding through heaven*
*and the stars,*
*Speeding amid the seven satellites and the broad ring the*
*diameter*
*of eighty thousand miles,*
*Speeding with tailed meteors . . . . throwing fire-balls*
*like the rest,*
*Carrying the crescent child that carries its own full mother*
*in its belly,*
*Storming enjoying planning loving cautioning*
*Backing and filling, appearing and disappearing,*
*I tread day and night such roads. (68)*

And finally here, in this out of body apostrophe of ecstatic empathy, "an acme of things accomplished . . . an encloser of things to be," he falls apart:

*O Christ! My fit is mastering me!*

. . .

*These become mine and me every one, and they are but little,*
*I become as much more as I like.*

*I become any presence or truth of humanity here,*
*And see myself in prison shaped like another man,*
*And feel the dull unintermitted pain. (76)*

After he gathers himself, he returns to "you:"

*You are asking me questions, and I hear you;*
*I answer that I cannot answer . . . you must find out*
*for yourself.*

. . .

*Long have you timidly waded, holding a plank by the shore,*
*Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,*
*To jump off in the midst of the sea and rise again and nod to*
*me and shout and laughingly dash with your hair. (90-91)*

Followed shortly by these famous lines:

*Do I contradict myself?*
*Very well then . . . . I contradict myself;*
*I am large . . . . I contain multitudes.*

*I concentrate toward them that are nigh . . . . I wait*
*on the door slab.*

*Who has done his day's work and will soonest be through*
*with his supper?*

*Who wishes to walk with me?*

*Will you speak before I am gone! Will you prove already too late? (95-96)*

He closes this way:

*I depart as air . . . . I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,*
*I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags.*
*I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,*
*If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles,*

*You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,*
*But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,*
*and filter and fibre your blood.*

*Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,*
*Missing me one place search another,*
*I stop somewhere waiting for you. (96)*

So beautiful, generous, serene. I realize I've done little more here than let him speak. But that is the beauty of this poem. You want to let him speak. Not so you can learn what he has to say deferentially, but so you can gain the energy you need, the momentum, to go forth and make an amazing poem of you own, a life of your own, a mind of your own. Lots of poets seem to make that promise, to listen, to stay out of your way, to cheer you on. Whitman is the only one I know who keeps it, wants you to live up to your own promise, to "celebrate" yourself, as he does, for every atom that belongs to you as good belongs to him. And it's not just pertinent to writing. It is the best way to teach, too. And to love, yes, above all, to love. Write, teach, love. That is Whitman in a nutshell.

## Poem

I wrote this poem about 35 years ago in Colorado Springs, my first extended time in the high mountains, which baffled me then in much the same way as the big woods here baffled me last summer. I just couldn't contain them with my available vocabulary. For some reason, this poem seems to me to have a Whitmanic aspect to it. I hadn't thought about it or read it for maybe 30 years. I thought it was lost for good on some discarded floppy disk. But I'm glad I remembered it and was able to recover it from an old computer file.

***Pike's Peak***

*I came for nothing*
*but a pretty good tan*

*then the mountains*
*massed, vexing*
*a sky, wide and unoccupied*
*turbulent spaces*
*only a new eye*
*can size up*
*break down*
*over and over spending*
*attention*
*proportions of perception*
*reordered*

*a whole season of sun in a week*
*tanning into the evening*
*heat, skin sweating*
*through the night*

*pigments gathering*

*in solitude abiding*
*keen-eyed, silent*
*the dry heat of thinking*
*leaner and leaner*
*toward nothing*
*but a reputation for distance*
*a pretty good tan*

*the western sky*
*cowboy blue an hour after sundown*
*thin air*
*the sting of stars*
*refusing to use even the fewest words*

*I lean back, listen*
*skin stung with sunburn turning*
*one word conserved, another*
*red rock*
*sandstone*
*fool's gold*

*too deep even to feel*
*massive plates of hot rock drift*
*casual under pressure*
*willing simply*
*to give*
*in the nature of things*
*resources in transit*
*the silent sky intruded upon*

*I do not know any longer*
*what it is possible*
*to learn, teach*
*all afternoon*
*the grass lengthening*

*perceptibly under me*
*long silences over dinner*
*listening*
*lapses of attention*
*the privacy of sunburn turning*
*courage to preserve*
*orders, order*
*let go*

*strangers in a strange place*
*cannot remain strangers long*
*presenting oneself*
*in the proper light*
*anyone's skin*
*turns, the sun unconcerned*
*with pleasantries*
*over breakfast*
*voices seeking*
*the heat of speech*

*lint of cottonwood blowing*
*up the steep slope*
*to snow in the air*
*brutal reversal of seasons*
*a geography of loss*
*grasped in the passing*
*maps of the mind*
*redrawn, the state*
*of things abiding*
*sun, snow, stars*
*struggle of feeling*
*the peak*
*peace*
*willing simply*
*to give*
*in my words forming*
*too deep to feel*

*the burning*
*under my shirt*
*hot skin turning*

*words into*
*nothing*
*but a pretty good tan*

## Emily Dickinson

*To be Susan*
*is imagination.*
*To have been*
*Susan, a dream—*
*What depths*
*of Domingo*
*in that torrid*
*Spirit!*

A note to Susan from Emily, early 1880s

I met my wife Carol serendipitously, one of those miracles of intersection that are lottery-type improbable, but happen, in October of 1982, a gorgeous fall Saturday. I had been driving through central Pennsylvania literally "celebrating myself," what I felt was my liberation from a series of unsuccessful relationships I had been running through in the aftermath of my first great loss. I wanted out and I worked at it. Took maybe six months. But that day, when I woke up, I knew I was free, just me, ready to move on.

I stopped for a while at Brady's Bend, at the top of a steep hill overlooking that large crook in the Allegheny river and watched some hang gliders for a while, got a great slice of pie at the diner right there, and headed east, just by happenstance, toward State College. To explain all the convolutions that were involved in my ending up having dinner with Carol that night would be, as Socrates says, "a long tale to tell." But we did. She walked up the steps into that second-floor restaurant, and it was over for me. Later she told me it was so for her, too, though, as she put it, "I knew I was in trouble."

She was finishing a Master's degree at Penn State, so for the next year we were intimate remotely, traveling back and forth when we could, but mostly writing letters. Long letters. Amazing letters. Almost-every-day letters. The kind of letters that could end up in a book, like the one I'm reading now (*Open Me Carefully*, edited by Ellen Louise Hart and Martha) of Emily Dickinson's letters to Susan Huntington Dickinson, first her dear friend then her brother Austin's wife. Carol was like me, did some of her best thinking and loving on paper in the most elegant, electric, intense way. I miss letter-writing as a thing of that sort. A mode of intimacy, of love. I sometimes try to use email to simulate it, but it is not the same, and quite often "sounds," those little letters flickering up on a screen instead of hand drawn on paper, foolish instead of amazing. It is hard to fall in love with someone by email. It is easy to do so through the mail.

Anyway, those letters will not end up in a book. A few years before she died, Carol asked and I agreed to destroy them, to save the kids the heartache (or embarrassment) of finding them in the attic, going through them, all of that. Carol's first husband died very young, 29, out of the blue. She found him the way I found her, coming home, normal day, on the floor. Dead. I put that word in its own sentence. It is a brutal word, belongs alone, when it describes what she and I found 35 years apart. Dead. She had to go through his effects, their belongings. She was deeply and permanently traumatized by that. Never got over it. She wanted to do everything possible to make our passings as easy on the kids as possible. So, among many other things, those letters went. Not into the garbage, where one or two of them might fly out of the truck in the wind, picked up by some stranger. No. Burned. They were that torrid.

Emily Dickinson asked her sister to destroy her letters after she passed, which was customary at that time, the ones she hadn't already destroyed herself for her own good reasons. So the correspondence we have of hers is mostly her letters to the

people she wrote to, though the book I'm reading includes a few of Susan's letters to her that somehow survived. It is an astonishing body of work. She wrote letters of consequence to at least 100 people. *Open Me Carefully* contains what the editors call a "selection" from the Susan-letters archive: letters, letter-poems, and poems associated with her love for Susan. It is over 250 pages long, small font, the way books are not the way handwriting is, and all of Dickinson's letters were, of course, handwritten. And they are astonishingly beautiful. There is no question why those she wrote to kept those missives, read them repeatedly most likely, so emotionally ethereal, seductively poetic, so full of life and love they are.

There is, to me, no hard line between Emily's poems and these letters. Hardly a line at all. They are all poems. If all she had done in her life was write these letters, she would be worth reading for eternity. As a great poet! I've barely scraped the surface of the trove of her life's letters. I have written before about her correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, whom she clearly wanted to sponsor her poetic career in some way, use his considerable leverage to do things she couldn't. He knew she was worthy of that, more than worthy. Just look at the poems she sent him sometime. They are among the ones we are reading with awe to this day. He was too big of an oaf, just too arrogant, self-interested, to do anything but keep stringing her along. A fool. For twenty years. Then, after her death, he harvested her work and made his fame by publishing it, in concert with Mabel Loomis Todd, who was Emily's brother's mistress at the time, self-interested on the same scale as Higginson. Todd edited the first edition of Emily's letters, which didn't include her letters to Susan. The editors of this book have found, using current photographic techniques, that some of these letters were altered to make them appear less affectionate toward Susan. Most likely, it was Todd who did this. As I said, she was the "younger woman" having an affair with Emily's brother while he was still married to Susan. What a pair to leave your legacy to. Emily did not ask her sister to destroy

her poems. I'm so glad they weren't. Except for the fact that Higginson and Todd got to use them to their benefit. It would almost be worth it to have lost them just to prevent that affront. We would still have the letters she sent to others, as poetic a treasure as anyone could ever hope to find. But, fortunately, we have both, now fully restored to their original form, as Dickinson wrote them.

I have no idea how I can get across to you the range of emotions, the vitality, the humor, the pathos, the depth of human hopes and needs and desires and fears that these letters embody. And I mean embody, because, if you've read any of her poems, you know what poetic gifts Emily had for embodying the deepest reaches of human experience in this world, could say more in a few lines than most of us can say in a month of Sundays. So I'll probably do something like what I did with Whitman, let her speak for herself. Like him, she is more than capable of doing that better than I can.

I had actually decided at one point to write about both Whitman and Dickinson simultaneously, started, but it got too complicated. My reason for doing that is simple: Both are victims, and I mean that word in its express sense. Victims. Of our cultural obsession with sexuality in its most simplistic modes. O-oooh, Whitman must have been gay, Emily Dickinson must have been a lesbian, that kind of thing, as if it explains anything of consequence about either of them. It doesn't. It explains everything you need to know about our cultural attitude toward sexuality generally, and toward art and artists specifically, about what we value and why, and of course about the critic writing it. Blessedly, the editors of *Open Me Carefully* do none of this. Still, I want as best I can to urge all readers of those two poets to get past that kind of fetishism, to see them as full-fledged human beings. Who loved. Deeply, comprehensively, beautifully, sensually, sexually, all of it. Loved men, women, things of all sorts, everything they saw, thought, all of it. Not many kinds of love, one kind of love with many facets.

Whether they had actual physical sex of one type or another is not the point. I hope they did. Lots of it. Because for either, sex would have been a most beautiful expression of true love, no matter who the partner nor how many.

About 10 years ago I was driving home from work listening to Terry Gross on NPR. She was in the midst of a multi-person "conversation," mostly pre-taped from phone interviews, a remembrance for some writer or musician who had just committed suicide. I came into to it too late to know exactly whom they were talking about, just that he was a "he." Gross had interviewed him on her program about month prior to this and had found him excited, exciting, passionate, brimming with life. She basically asked the same question over and over, incredulous that he had taken his own life: "How could someone so full of life one minute, and with such talent, end up in such despair the next, enough to end it all this way?" Over and over, she got the same response: If you knew this man, you'd know that all of that was there all the time all at once. It was not a now/later or an either/or matter, had no binary aspect to it at all. It was multiples, layers, way more than two, equally present in every instant. No one said this exactly, but implied that he wanted to live forever and kill himself every second of his life. I don't think she could process this. It had to be one or the other, something must have happened in the interim since her interview with him. It just didn't make sense to her otherwise. Over and over she persisted, no matter how clearly the point was made.

Here's what I want to say about that: Whitman and Dickinson are exactly the same as that man, in relation to their sexuality, in relation to everything. It was all there all the time all at once. It is very hard to use words, so linear and progressive in nature, to convey such a timeless unity of spirit. But these two writers do it as well as anyone, Whitman through the breathtaking, never-ending fluidity of his descriptions, those extravagantly long lines lapping over on themselves, light waves or huge breakers, over

one another, layer after layer after layer. He is the poet of extension. Dickinson is the poet of compression. Her short poems have just as many layers, but built right on top of, even into, one another, three or four say in every image, sometimes in a single word, so vexing in its complexity you feel like you can dwell on it for days and still not fully fathom its depths. That's what great artists do. It's why we read them.

But I also want to insist that, on an experiential level, it is not just great artists who are as complex and layered as the man Gross was honoring that day or as Whitman and Dickinson are. Everyone is, at least to some extent, or at least at some times. I surely am. I've written repeatedly about the fact that there are multiple emotions, feelings, thoughts, images happening simultaneously in there, some of them mutually contradictory on the face of it, but still companionable in real-life-time. Laugh and cry, joy and sorrow, life and death, right next to each other, or, more accurately, inhabiting the same space, inseparable from one another. Take away one, you lose them both, or lose them all. I bet that's true for you, too. And it is most especially so for what Whitman and Dickinson and I call "love." There is, of course, a difference for me between falling in love with a woman who might become my sexual partner and falling in love with a manhole cover. But it is difference of timbre not of tune. As is the case with Whitman and Dickinson, even the latter can have an erotic aspect to it, if it's real love, I mean, not a sham. Conversely, if what you want to know about my sexuality is whom I have had sex with, and you think by that means you'll get to know anything of interest or consequence about who I am or how I love, you are wasting your time. And mine.

The human mind is, as I've been saying all along here, capable of holding all kinds of apparent contraries, including eternal life and instant death, in its grasp simultaneously, almost has to at least from time to time, our lives here so fraught with joys and sorrows. Mine certainly does. And I'm surely way more like everyone else than I am like Whitman or Dickinson. In other

words, what applies to them, this need to be generous, comprehensive, in our approach to the fulsome sexuality of these great artists, and all great artists, applies to me, to you, to everyone. To spend time ferreting out clues about who had sex with whom is crassly voyeuristic, and ultimately as pathetic and destructive as was Thomas Wentworth Higginson's intrusive nosiness about Emily Dickinson's identity—who are you, where do you live, send me a picture, I need to come and meet you—when he could instead have heard what she was clearly asking of him, loved her poems, loved her in the way he was capable, in the way she was asking. And done it.

Emily's letters (she signs them some of them "Emilie") to Susan (whom she addresses variously as "Sue," or "Susie," or "Susan," sometimes "S," over the 35 years or so they corresponded) are of a different order, in a different key, from the Higginson letters, more forthright, more poignant, more exquisite. You can tell from the very first that she was in love with Susan. In what way? In the real way: true love. Every time I write about Emily Dickinson I get agitated, end up in a rant. I've already used up too much space here doing that when you could have been listening to her sweet voice. So here are some excerpts from the nearly constant stream of letters she had delivered to Susan by mail, or, later, delivered herself, little folded up squares of paper, complete with doodles and poems, on the walkway between her father's house, where she lived, and her brother's house next door. Most of these passages are, by necessity here, just a sentence or two from letters that go on for pages with comparably astonishing sentences. Like this one that she wrote when she was twenty-one, having recently met Susan:

> *I wept a tear here Susie—on purpose for you—because this "sweet silver moon" smiles in on me and Vinnie [her sister], and then it goes so far before it gets to you—and then you never told me if there <u>was</u> a moon in Baltimore [where Susan had just moved to take a teaching job]—and how do I know Susie—that you see her sweet face at all?*

*She looks like a fairy tonight, sailing around the sky in a little silver gondola with stars for gondoliers. I asked her to let me ride a little while ago—and told her I would get out when she got as far as Baltimore, but she only smiled to herself and went sailing on. (1851, p. 8)*

And this one,

*Susie, what shall I do—there isn't room enough; not half enough, to hold what I was going to say. Won't you tell the man who makes sheets of paper, that I hav'nt the slightest respect for him. (1852, p. 18)*

which was written upside down on the first page of an essay-length letter that opens this way, she excited about a "snow day:"

*Thank the dear little snow flakes, because they fall today rather than some vain weekday, when the world and the cares of the world would try so hard to keep me from my departed friend—and thank you, too, dear Susie, that you never weary of me, or never tell me so, and that when the world is cold, and the storm sighs e'er so piteously, I am sure of one sweet shelter, one covert from the storm! The bells are ringing, Susie, north and east and south, and your village bell, and the people who love God, are expecting to go to meeting; don't you go, Susie, not to their meeting, but come with me this morning to the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing, and the preacher whose name is Love—shall intercede for us. (1852, pp. 14-15)*

And this one:

*I do think it's wonderful, Susie, that our hearts don't break every day, when I think of all the whiskers, and all the gallant men, but I guess I'm made with nothing but a hard heart of stone, for it dont break any, and dear Susie,*

*if mine is stony, yours is stone, upon stone, for you never yield any, where I seem quite beflown. Are we going to ossify always, say, Susie, how will it be? (1852, p.21)*

Or this idyllic one:

*I have but one thought, Susie, this afternoon of June, and that of you, and I have one prayer, only; dear Susie, that is for you. That you and I in hand as we e'en do in heart, might ramble as children, among the woods and fields, and forget these many fears, and these sorrowing cares, and each become a child again—I would it were so, Susie, and when I look around me and find myself alone, I sigh for you again; little sigh, and vain sigh, which will not bring you home. (1852, p.33)*

Or this poignant one:

*Susie—it is a little thing to say how lone it is—anyone can do it, but to wear the loneness next to your heart for weeks, when you sleep, and when you wake, ever missing, this, all cannot say, and it baffles me.*

*I could paint a portrait which would bring the tears, had I canvass for it, and the scene should be solitude, and the figures—solitude—and the lights and shades, each a solitude. . . .*

*In all I number you. I want to think of you each hour in the day. What you are saying—doing—I want to walk with you, as seeing the unseen. You say you walk and sew alone. I walk and sew alone. (1854, p. 51)*

I could go on and on all day and night typing passages like these, the long early letters, so luxurious and flamboyant, the briefer notes and poems she wrote after Susan married Austin and lived next door, tighter, more cryptic, hundreds of

missives, full of dark and light, sweet and sorrow, as beautiful as these.

As I said in an earlier piece, I am in love with her. As much as I've ever been in love with anyone or anything. I think, reading just these letters, you can see why. My love for her may seem on the face of it delusional. It is not. So I can never meet her nor she me. No matter. I have been in love, "from afar" with people who never got to know me, or maybe even noticed me. Even death's farness does not deter love. So maybe she wouldn't have any interest in me if she had known me. No matter. I know very well how hard it is to be in love with someone not in love with you. I would still be in love with her. I said in *This Fall* that falling in love is always a choice. But it is one based on what we see in the other, hope for, believe in, not on the guarantee of an equitable return. If I were lucky enough to have been with Emily, even sitting right next to her all those later years when she spent most of her time in her room, I would have written her a letter every day, handed it to her, and hoped I'd get one back from her. If she wrote me even one letter in return, I would have treasured it the way Susan seems to have treasured hers, reread it over and over, when life was grand or hopeless, to know deeply that there was beauty and poetry and above all love still afloat, would burn eternally on this churning, turbulent earth. It would have been as fulsome a life as I can imagine.

To love another with all your heart takes great courage under any circumstances, most especially so when the chance of reciprocation at that level is slight or nil. If you read Dickinson's letters you will see a profile in such courage. But Susan did respond, often and warmly enough to sustain Emily's passion for all of those years. The ultimate risk in an unrequited love is that the beloved will respond harshly, and you will be made to feel a fool. That is hard. But at least it's "terminal." You move on sooner or later. I don't sense in

these letters that Emily even fears that, let alone feels it. Susan never does this. There is, of course, a gray area between, where the response is minimal. As I put it to myself: "You don't have to think someone a fool to make them feel like one." Especially when they are in love with you. And there is no better way to do it than with silence. That love will perish even if you don't want it to. Susan may have married Emily's brother, but she sustains and continues to foster an ample love for Emily. She is not silent. I am so happy to know that, that Emily lived in those good graces, even if her love may have been "unrequited" in some ways. That Mabel Loomis Todd then tries later to "silence" that part of Emily's life is, honestly, just despicable.

Dickinson's poems are, of course, equally riveting. Here's what I said in *Spring Forward* about one aspect of my personal relationship with her work:

> Last fall, as I said, I translated a bunch of Emily Dickinson poems into songs for the Christmas album I send to family and a few friends every year. She has a reputation as a major-league recluse, at least according to the common stereotype of her. I was lying on the couch one night and her "Nobody" poem came into my head for some reason. Here is her poem:
>
> *I'm Nobody! Who are you?*
> *Are you—Nobody—Too?*
> *Then there's a pair of us!*
> *Don't tell! they'd advertise—you know!*
>
> *How dreary—to be—Somebody!*
> *How public—like a Frog—*
> *To tell one's name—the livelong June—*
> *To an admiring Bog! (47)*

I thought yes, yes "I'm Nobody—Too." Thanks for asking! Right then, I felt a deep, intimate connection with her. She was, I thought, much like me. I ended up that night writing a song of my own in response her, a love letter of sorts, a way to say back, I'm here, let's get together.

. . .

I got up from the couch and went to the sunroom to record the song, just like that. The tune came automatically, really, her work is so rhythmic, in the style of church hymns, the old "fourteener" structure. And we did get together that night. It was beautiful.

That's when I decided to make a whole album of songs based on her poems. I riffled through a bunch of my favorite Emily Dickinson poems, tried a few with my guitar, settled on some that seemed to work well, then turned them into songs one by one: "Because he loves her," "There's a certain Slant of Light," "I taste a liquor never brewed," "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." It was slow for the first day or two. Then one night, in a fever-pitch about all this, I woke up around three, restless, agitated, knew I'd never get back sleep. I opened the book to her "Wild Nights" poem, the one I mentioned earlier, turned on my equipment, and rasped out my version of it, no plan, just made up the tune as I went. It was electric, Emily Dickinson and I wild together. I sang the song exactly the way she wrote it, repeating parts of it to make it long enough for a song. Here is her poem . . . :

*Wild nights - Wild nights!*
*Were I with thee*
*Wild nights should be*
*Our luxury!*

*Futile - the winds -*
*To a Heart in port -*
*Done with the Compass -*
*Done with the Chart!*

*Rowing in Eden -*
*Ah - the Sea!*
*Might I but moor - tonight -*
*In thee! (32)*

Wow! Just stop and take that in. It might be one of the sexiest poems I've ever read. No matter whether it is man or woman she wants to moor with, or both. There are arguments out there on all sides of that. Like Whitman, she is capable of enough passion, enough desire, enough sensuosity to love anyone and everyone, including me. And all this stuff about her being prissy, repressed, even a prude. Read the poem, for godssake. Emily Dickinson is as torrid as my emotions in that song.

Then I did her "Hope is the thing with feathers" poem, again, no plan, just started singing and playing. It brought me to tears several times. If you listen to that song on the album, which is the take I used, even though I had much "better" ones, you'll know why. The emotion is raw and all there. You cannot understand how strong and durable hope can be, how it can persist for eons of human time without any sustenance, singing its wordless tune into the darkness, the wind, asking for nothing—unless you also fear how it feels to be hopeless, utterly hopeless. Emily Dickinson knew that. I do, too. Here is my song, which I turned into a conversation with her, her call, my response, the two of us communing with that hopeful thing with feathers. The parts I added to simulate a back and forth are bracketed:

*Hope [you told me] is the thing with feathers*
*–*
*That perches in the soul –*
*And sings the tune without the words –*
*And never stops –at all –*

*And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –*
*And sore must be the storm –*
*That could abash the little Bird*
*That kept so many warm –*

*[Since then]*

*I've heard it in the chillest land –*
*And on the strangest Sea –*
*Yet – never – in Extremity,*
*It asked a crumb – of me.*

*[Hope is the thing with feathers –*
*That perches in the soul –*
*And sings the tune without the words –*
*And never stops – at all –*

*I've heard it in the chillest land –*
*And on the strangest Sea –*
*Yet – never – in Extremity,*
*It asked a crumb – of me.] (34)*

> It was an amazing night, as close as I've felt to a woman since Carol passed. (61-65)

I have been writing about love, in one way or another, for four years now, multiple books, all arguing, in one way or another, that love, true love, is not an assortment of different emotions depending on the subject of one's attention, arranged in some hierarchy wherein some are higher or better and some are

lower and less important. And most especially not one with sexual love at the top. It is one thing with many manifestations. Seeing can be an act of love, or not. Sex can be an act of love, or not. They are equal in that regard. This is how I get back to my main track here: the imagination, which animates and coordinates all of our manifold expressions of love as we engage with the world we have to live in here. It brings the other, whoever and whatever that might be, into being in our loving presence. Without it, well, you end up with lots of "or nots."

One final thing. The editors of *Open Me Carefully* include as I said many other texts that are not stereotypical letters. During the latter years of her life, with Susan right next door, some of her "letters" were little notes squeezed onto squares of paper multi-folded, the space of the page forcing short lines, like the one I use as my epigraph. They look like poems. Like her poems. The authors call these "letter-poems," which is brilliant. As I say above, having now read them, all of these letters are letter-poems, or poem-letters. They are that astonishing. So were her letters to Higginson, so daring, coy and evasive, letter-poems of another kind.

Percy Shelley argues in his "Defense of Poetry" that the category "poetry" is not limited to linguistic productions. For him (and for me, too) almost anything, when envisioned imaginatively, can become poetic. Likewise for "poems." Anything made out of words can be a great poem. Even an email or a text, if it is made with care, imaginatively. Look at the poem at the top. It is as short as most texts, yet so deep and beautiful. I could argue, because I believe it, that one can make a great poem without any words at all. But that would be a "long tale to tell," and I'm pretty sure by this point you can imagine everything I might want to say about that without my having to utter one word. If not, take a walk in the woods and think about Emily Dickinson, her great love, her great way of loving, as I did about a month

ago when I decided to write this book. You will have a poem in your heart you will never forget.

## Poem

Right before I left Pittsburgh I wrote these two poems "in the manner of Emily Dickinson," just because I felt like it:

*1*

*Settled in a second—*
*how her eyelid moved,*
*the words I had just heard—*
*disproved.*

*Truth by definition*
*finds respite in the small—*
*words are weak—*
*an eyelid says it all.*

*2*

*Arrayed around a table—*
*statues—a voice I cannot hear—*
*a woman with a grimace—*
*a man with unkempt beard—*

*and twenty more of each*
*iterated chair by chair—*
*I walk by sidewise glancing*
*glad I'm here not there.*

# T. S. Eliot

The American Modernists (I'll be writing about several of them here) fancied themselves as anti-Romantic, especially in relation to its Wordsworthian version. And they were, in many essential aspects. They felt Romantic poetry was too vague and indistinct in its mode of representation, wanted immediate perception and not "emotion recollected" later "in tranquillity," which made it too mushy, an afterthought instead of a thought. It was basically not "thing"-y enough, that word that became their mantra, from the outset in Pound's 1912 definition of "Imagism," the first tenet of which is "direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective," to Williams' later dictum: "no ideas but in things." But you can't be totally opposite something that remains in your argument as a vital contrary, one you depend on to make your engine run.

Eliot is good example of this. Take that famous poem he published first in 1915, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." The opening lines are,

> *Let us go then, you and I*
> *when the evening is spread out against the sky . . . (3)*

I can't help but think that his informed readers at the time would hear echoes here, as I do, of the opening line of Wordsworth's famous "evening" sonnet: "It is a beauteous evening, calm and free . . ." Eliot's whole method invited and relied on such echoes, which are called "allusions" in the lexicon of Modernist criticism and became a highly valued feature of worthy poems for a couple of generations. The next line in Wordsworth's poem is a figurative representation of a beauteous calm: "The holy time is quiet as a nun." So I'm reading along with Eliot and maybe expecting something along those lines. Instead, he delivers this jolt: "like a patient etherized upon a table." Yuck. It is so

extreme, so over the top, as if Eliot hoped he might be able to demolish Wordsworth in one figurative stroke.

In his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), Eliot takes on Wordsworth's ideology directly, offering a critique of the famous sentence I quoted earlier, "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." Eliot counters:

> *The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. Consequently, we must believe that "emotion recollected in tranquillity" is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not "recollected," and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is "tranquil" only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. Of course this is not quite the whole story. There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him "personal." Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (107)*

He doesn't even bother to mention Wordsworth's name, he is that dismissive. And by "inexact" he means absolutely, entirely wrong in all of its elements and in its purpose. Okay, Wordsworth, done. I didn't need to quote the second half of that paragraph to make my point, but I did because it is so quintessentially Eliotic, especially the last sentence. Every time I read it I'm thinking first, gee, I wonder if I actually have personality and emotions worth escaping from? Yes, of course I do, Eliot would certainly approve of me. But do I want to "escape" from them? What does that even mean? What's left if I do? Then I think, well, maybe I don't and should be glad of it. This guy is just a snide, elitist prick. I'll hang on to my emotions and personality like the rest of us schmucks down here in the human universe. See how you feel when you read that, which side you want to come down on in terms of this problem of who has legitimate personality and emotions and who doesn't.

A little earlier in that same essay he compares the poet's mind to the platinum catalyst in that famous chemical experiment where a different compound is produced without assimilating anything new, essentially the way a catalytic converter works in contemporary cars:

> *The analogy was that of the catalyst. When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material. (104)*

I think it's pretty clear what he means by poetic imagination, though that is a term he usually avoids, as if it, too, is hopelessly tainted by the Romantic system that valorized it. It is the catalyst that creates something without adding any taint of itself to the resultant compound, an "inside" element that is "outside" by its very nature, both generative and inert. Interestingly to me, the product of this chemical alchemy is about as noxious a substance as you could want: sulphurous acid. It makes me think of those smoking slag piles around Scranton, where I grew up, the "mine fires" that burned slowly and eternally, releasing gases into air that, when combined with water in the form of rain, turned into sulfuric acid strong enough to take the paint off your house. If you read further into "Prufrock" you'll find the poetic predecessor to it in all that swirling, stinky fog he wants us to walk with him through, as in this passage:

*The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,*
*The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,*
*Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,*
*Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,*
*Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,*
*Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,*
*And seeing that it was a soft October night,*
*Curled once about the house, and fell asleep. (4)*

This is also, I think, Eliot's tacit critique of the more sentimentalized American poetry of his day, for example in poems like Carl Sandburg's "Fog," which came out, coincidentally, a year after Eliot's:

*The fog comes*
*on little cat feet.*

*It sits looking*
*over harbor and city*
*on silent haunches*
*and then moves on.*

How about that for a couple of cool cats arguing it out about fog via their poems. Many people these days think of poets as remote from the life and death struggles of ideological strife in the world. They are not. Postmodernist poetry for example is deeply and directly political, especially in matters pertaining to race and gender. But you can look back at any of the guys I've written about (and they are all guys, except for Dickinson, up to this point.) They believed they were dealing with matters of considerable philosophical, political, and ultimately moral import in their work. The stakes were not just large, they were everything. Like politicians these days. Except the great poets are smart and know how to write.

The last element of Eliot's system as it pertains to imagination, which, as I said, he never names with that word, is this thing he called "the 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. (141)*

For Wordsworth, emotion is not a matter of objects and external facts, though it may pertain to them. It is about feelings generated after the "fact" by recollection. Eliot wants to assemble a "formula" to evoke a "sensory experience" "immediately." The term "objective correlative" is just a little sidelight in his famous essay "Hamlet and His Problems," but critics first, then other poets, seized on it quickly, elevated it to law, and used it to define for a generation what "good" poetry would do and look like. Again, most readers of poems think poets are all unique and original. They are not. Some are, especially at those crucial junctions of ideological transition that happen cataclysmically

every now and then in poetic theory. A few of them argue furiously until a precedent is established. Then for quite a while thereafter that's just how poets write poems because that is just what poems are, definitively, in their cultural moment. Go too far off the rails here and you might become famous, even historically great. It just won't be in your own lifetime.

## Poem

I chose this poem, called "Missing Americans," which I wrote in 1981, because it has some of the darkness of the kind of walk Eliot invites us to share with him; it makes very specific references, allusions of sorts by how I frame them, to people that were in the news the week I wrote it: Buffalo Bob Smith of Howdy Doody fame, Norman Vincent Peale, and most horribly, the four nuns that were gunned down in El Salvador for no apparent reason except they were nuns. It was not "a beauteous evening calm and free."

*Bearded, sweaty, he crouches in the shade*
*leafing through the August Penthouse.*
*I buy a dozen daisies from him, pretending*
*the day is lovely, there is romance*
*where I'm going, a woman in the flesh.*
*As I turn the corner a wall of heat*
*heaves up from the street. I stroll*
*slowly through it, pretending I am*
*Norman Vincent Peale afloat on an iceberg.*
*It doesn't work. I am too hot to think*
*straight, might as well be Buffalo Bob*
*layered in braided suede, or Howdy*
*Doody, wooden headed and sweatless.*

*They say the weather is going crazy.*
*El Niño swirls slowly off the coast of Peru.*
*Molten lava oozes down a swollen Hawaiian*

*hillside. A year's worth of rain falls*
*in a weekend on Galveston. The Sudan*
*turns Sahara. And I am only halfway*
*home. Norman Vincent Peale is lost at sea.*
*His ice cube clinks inside a glass.*
*Clarabell steals a Jeep in El Salvador.*
*Four nuns fall to their knees pleading,*
*el niño, el niño, just a kid, shoots them*
*to keep cool. I stroll slowly home alone,*
*a dozen daisies wilting in my fist.*

## William Carlos Williams

I've already made reference to William Carlos Williams' weird and astonishing little book *Spring and All*. Here's what he says later in life about what was happening, had just happened in fact, at the moment he was composing it:

> *Then out of the blue The Dial brought out "The Waste Land" and all our hilarity ended. It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it and our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust.*
>
> *To me especially it struck like a sardonic bullet. I felt at once that it had set me back twenty years, and I'm sure it did. Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself–rooted in the locality which should give it fruit. I knew at once that in certain ways I was most defeated.*
>
> *Eliot had turned his back on the possibility of reviving my world. And being an accomplished craftsman, better skilled in some ways than I could ever hope to be, I had to watch him carry my world off with him, the fool, to the enemy. (Auto, 174)*

If Eliot's poem was like an atom bomb, Williams' response to it is at least a stick of dynamite. And, in the long run, if you look at the history of American poetry over the intervening century, Williams' explosion won out. He did live long enough the see the Beat generation and the Black Mountain movement, both of which were inspired by his work. And within a decade after his death in 1963, the legacy of Eliot (to my way of reading, though others might argue it) had played out and the legacy of Williams was more fully to the fore.

As it pertains to the imagination, I have already noted the radical move he makes early in the book: "To whom then am I addressed ? To the Imagination" (3). It is such an oddly constructed pair of sentences. The anomaly of the extra space before the question mark is interesting only because there are many, many such "errata" in this book, misspellings, out of order chapters, upside-down printings, missing words, sentences that end in mid-air, strange punctuation. Most of them are intentional, a satiric attempt at the formal level to critique the sort of order that "traditional" writers (like Eliot, say, who uses that term centrally in his critical system) are fastidious about. The only thing in this book that Williams seems to be fastidious about is the poems, which are luminous, brightly lit islands poking up out to the turbulent sea of his prose.

There is also the odd "whom," and the "to," neither of which are conventional ways of orchestrating our relationship with what is "traditionally" considered a mental faculty, an interiority. Here, the imagination is a being in its own right, both inside and outside at the same time, rhetorically speaking. That's just interesting, provocative of thought, a conundrum. I like that aspect of it. A couple of pages later, he adds time to the equation: "The imagination is supreme. To it all our works forever, from the remotest past to the farthest future, have been, are and will be dedicated." I guess that about covers everything.

I mentioned earlier the Modernist obsession with "the thing" as a poetic cornerstone, a word that had no currency in relation to imaginative work, outside of its routine meaning, in the 19th century. Williams' famous dictum, which I'll repeat, is "No ideas but in things," a single line in his magnus opus, *Paterson* (1927), a sentence he never explains, either then or later, after it had become, literally, the foundational mantra for several literary "schools." I'm going to try to tease something out here about that, because I think it's important to have at least a crude road

map before you head off in search of something, or some "things."

I see two elements of this thing he names "things" here. One pertains to the outside world, all the actual things we encounter out there, Nature again, though far less spiritualized than it was for the Romantics. Soul is gone. Just "things" now in the desperate, agnostic aftermath of WWI, "rooted in the[ir] locality," still infused with light, not from a transcendent power, but by the imagination, via words. As Williams says, quite cryptically:

> *So long as the sky is recognized as an association*
>
> *is recognized in its function of accessary to vague words whose meaning it is impossible to rediscover*
> *its value can be nothing but mathematical certain limits of gravity and density of air*
>
> *the farmer and the fisherman who read their own lives there have a practical corrective for—*
>
> *they rediscover or replace demoded meanings to the religious terms*
>
> *Among them, without expansion of imagination, there is the residual contact between life and the imagination, which is essential to freedom (19)*

This is more like a poem than a set of precepts. Clearly Williams is not suggesting that poetry must be merely descriptive of "reality" out there. He actually says the opposite. The poet needs to relate to the world intimately, directly, the way a farmer and fisherman do, as if their lives and livelihoods depended on it, which they do. The poet does it with fully imagined words. It is at that juncture between words and "reality," in my view, where "things" reside. He says:

> *When in the condition of imaginative suspense only will the writting [sic] have reality, . . . Not to attempt, at that time, to set values on the word being used, according to presupposed measures, but to write down that which happens at that time— (48)*

Like right then, he means, in the moment, the force of imagination fusing world and word, creatively, into one "thing." So the key to me in understanding Williams sense of this "thing" is not to focus solely on what's out there, where actual things reside, but on the poem, which becomes a thing in its own right, capable of standing up in reality with the same vitality as the "objective" "things," that enter into it via words redeemed from their "demoded" forms.

He says later:

> *Nature is the hint to composition not because it is familiar to us . . . but because it possesses the quality of independent existance [sic], of reality which we feel in ourselves. It is not opposed to art but apposed to it....*
>
> *[The poet] holds no mirror up to nature but with his imagination rivals nature's composition with his own ... Poetry has to do with the crystallization of the imagination—the perfection of new forms as additions to nature... (50-51)*
>
> *To understand the words as so liberated is to understand poetry. . .*
>
> *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—It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore . . . it creates a new object. (91)*

This may all sound needlessly arcane. But I elaborate it for the same reason I elaborate Wordsworth's actual method, which had nothing to do with just "spilling your guts," though it gets misread that way. Note Williams' little jab at Eliot here, those "objects or situations," the exact words Eliot uses in his definition of the "objective correlative." Williams' "things," the repositories of ideas, are, to my way of reading, not merely described objects but the poems themselves, which, when animated by the force of imagination, can take their place with legitimacy among the world of other legitimate "things" out there, upon which they "depend:" like that famous "red wheel barrow."

It won't be until the object-oriented-ontologists of the 21st century that a firm philosophical script emerges for this sort of a merger. But so much of the poetry of the 20th century is saturated with Williams' thingness. You don't need a philosopher to tell you what it means. Just read the poems. Especially his.

## Poem

I'm going to close this piece with one of Williams' poems because I like this one so much and it's one that doesn't get much attention, even though, among all the poems in his little book, I think it best illustrates the radical and intimate merger of these two distinct kinds of things, specifically here if you pay attention to the petal tip of the rose and think about how to define exactly where air stops and petal begins, or even which is which at any specific moment, a kind of poetic representation of the "uncertainty principle" in modern physics, two things both either and both at the same time, a principle Werner Heisenberg formulated, coincidentally, in 1927, the year Williams published his famous sentence about "things" in

Paterson. It is the only poem in the book that, for some reason, is unnumbered, though it takes its place as VII in the sequence:

*The rose is obsolete*
*but each petal ends in*
*an edge, the double facet*
*cementing the grooved*
*columns of air — The edge*
*cuts without cutting*
*meets — nothing— renews*
*itself in metal or porcelain—*

*whither? It ends —*

*But if it ends*
*the start is begun*
*so that to engage roses*
*becomes a geometry —*

*Sharper, neater, more cutting*
*figured in majolica —*
*the broken plate*
*glazed with a rose*

*Somewhere the sense*
*makes copper roses*
*steel roses —*
*The rose carried weight of love*
*but love is at an end — of roses*

*It is at the edge of the*
*petal that love waits*

*Crisp, worked to defeat*
*laboredness — fragile*
*plucked, moist, half-raised*
*cold, precise, touching*

*What*

*The place between the petal's*
*edge and the*

*From the petal's edge a line starts*
*that being of steel*
*infinitely fine, infinitely*
*rigid penetrates*
*the Milky Way*
*without contact — lifting*
*from it — neither hanging*
*nor pushing —*

*of the flower*
*unbruised*
*penetrates space (30-32)*

# H. D.

Hilda Doolittle is my favorite Modernist poet, having moved up the scale from less than zero when I was in college (her work wasn't even included in the massive Norton Anthology I used in my first survey course, if you can believe that!) to second behind William Carlos Williams during most of my adult life, as I got more and more familiar with her work, to first after I found her amazing book *Notes on Thought and Vision* maybe 20 years ago. She had the misfortune when she was young to fall under the sway of Ezra Pound, as did almost all of the other great Modernist writers, Eliot and Williams included. Pound groomed her, even renamed her, the vaguely ungendered H. D., and then promoted her, aggressively, as the prototypical "imagist," his obsession in the period just before and after WWI. That got her career off with a blast, but, unfortunately, left her captive to that "image" of herself as a poet, well, really forever, long after the movement died down and long after she had turned her imagistic skill to more and more complex and sustained poetic endeavors, *Trilogy*, for example, her brilliant WWII series written during the bombings in London, an astonishing *tour de force* that transfigures Western cultural history from a male- to a female-centered enterprise.

Modernism was particularly difficult on female poets—not necessarily overtly, though Pound was as misogynistic as he was mis- pretty much everything else, including the radio broadcasts he did for Mussolini during WWII, which nearly got him hanged for treason in the aftermath. The primary discourses that Modernism trafficked in are not aggressively anti-feminine. They simply take a patriarchal history for granted, as given, therefore hidden in plain sight. For a woman, the problem is then how to write from a gendered position when gender has been fully co-

opted as male. H. D. struggled with this. But she overcame it, too. Brilliantly. I wrote quite extensively about H.D. in *This Fall* (by means of which she earns worthily one of the longest "sketches" in this book) and there is no way I can say better what I have to say about her than I said there. So I'm just going to quote my slightly younger self from that essay, written in 2015. As I think I make clear here, her theory of imagination is vested in the female body and, specifically, in "vision," broadly defined:

> A few days ago, at work, I re-read H. D.'s *Notes on Thought and Vision,* such a unique, inspiring exploration of her notion of the creative process, orchestrated through an array of fully female, not feminine, not feminist, *female* figures. The first of its kind as far as I know, and still the best, concocted at an historical moment generally, and a life moment for her, that made the likelihood of producing such a treatise infinitesimally small. She actually grounds her metaphoric grid so interestingly, so surprisingly, in the female body, brain connected to womb, by establishing the figure of the "jellyfish" at the center of her system and then elaborating its implications. It would be 50 years before "vagina," "uterus," became commonplace terms in discussions of female creativity. They are not words H.D. uses, here in 1919, preferring the very tame (by our standards) "love regions," but she might as well have. It's that clear, to me at least, that they are included and implied in the way mind connects to body via the jellyfish.
>
> She talks a lot about this jellyfish business early in the book, so provocatively, engagingly. But it's halfway through the book before she fully shows her hand in her translation of male to female, and she does it in two succinct sentences:

*The world of vision has been symbolized in all ages by various priestly cults in all countries by the serpent.*

*In my personal language or vision, I call this serpent a jelly-fish. (40)*

I laughed out loud when I read this passage this time. It is brilliant: How do you get a jellyfish from a serpent? Who makes that move? Well, she did. And if you think about it figuratively rather than physically, it makes perfect sense. One is a penis, the other is a womb. All of a sudden, along the central figurative axis that organizes what poetry is, what creation is, what thinking and feeling are, a woman's body is at the core and a man's is not. H.D.'s whole career, a dramatic re-ordering of Western myth (*Helen In Egypt*), religion (*Trilogy*), poetics (*Hermetic Definition*) that installs female figures in the positions that have been held down by male figures for as long as anyone could remember, is just a footnote to this little slip of the tongue in *Notes:* You say serpent, I say jellyfish, let's call the whole thing off. And in my little thought experiment, the same one I used to "get" Emily Dickinson, I could see that if history had been gender-reversed and I was stuck on the Scilly Islands in 1919 trying to get my life together, wanting to be player in the world of poetry, I would have to do what she did: See a sea full of jellyfish contracting orgasmically around me and think: Well, how about a serpent instead. Brilliant.

This is a book almost no one reads. I don't think I've ever run across anyone who had read it before I taught it. As is the case with H.D.'s work generally, that staggering and magnificent oeuvre produced over her lifetime, clearly, to me, equal in innovation, scope and eloquence with anyone in the top-tier of male poets from her generation—Eliot, Williams, Pound, Stevens, any of

them. As the magnitude of her accomplishments became more and more evident to me over the years, just through more and more exposure to the work, I started wondering why I hadn't been apprised of her status when I was in college, reading all of those Modernist master-poets in my first survey course. So I went back to the *Norton Anthology* I used that term. I have no idea why I still have it, but I do. This iconic compilation, the gold standard for surveys back then, three inches thick, containing a little bit of everyone and a lot from all the big boys. I wanted to see what part of H.D.'s work was there. Well, it wasn't, none of it, nothing. I couldn't believe it. And now, further, why don't we read this little book I was reading. We read Eliot's *The Sacred Wood*, all those short, sharp blockbuster essays, and Williams' *Spring and All*, every bit as eccentric, serendipitous, outlandish as H.D.'s little book, tuned to the masculine register of tropes. But not *Notes on Thought and Vision.*

I was thinking on my walk today about how liberating it is, as a man, to have to think through the opposite set of figures, imagine how, if at all, my creative enterprise might or might not be channeled through a "womb," imagining that I am trying to write my way into a "tradition" that has been owned by women for millennia. What would I do? I might of course say, well, I don't have a womb so this doesn't apply to me. I guess I'll do something else. That is the exact conundrum out of which women creators have needed to emerge if they had any hope of being "writers" until well into the 20th century, all of the defenses, approaches, systems, rendered unreflexively through a figurative web that was masculine, patriarchal, or just plain phallic, my synecdochic example being the one I used in an earlier essay: Shelley's "Sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it." Again, yikes! Women could easily have said, as I am

supposing many did: "Well, this says I have to have a white-hot dick to do it, and I don't, so I can't." But many didn't say that. So what did they do that I now have to do as I sit and read this remarkable little book, me, Dr. Old White Male, the exact one who should be most readily precluded from this womb-based mode of creation? That's what I was thinking about today, riffing out, as I often do on these walks, some of the things I might want to say about it in class, animated, hands flashing around dramatically, my manifesto-performative mode, most of which, I hope, will winnow itself down to something manageable by 2 PM tomorrow. I won't go into all of that here. Or in class tomorrow, most likely. But I had a lot of fun thinking about it.

I actually read the book kind of backwards this time, as I often do when I re-read, starting somewhere *in medias res* that attracts me, re-assembling things piecemeal, back and forth, in and out, until I'm done. The section I ended up centered on this time was her description of the Chinese poet Lo-Fu's intimate relationship with a tree branch, which he first notices, then approaches, then gets so engrossed in, detail after detail, deep and deeper, that it becomes his "mistress," accompanying him back to his room, where he meditates caressingly on the memory until it comes even more fully to life, present in its absence. It starts out this way:

> *Lo-Fu sat in his orchard . . . and looked in a vague, casual way. Against the grey stones of the orchard wall he saw the low branch of an apple tree. He thought, that shoot should have been pruned, it hangs too low. Then as he looked at the straight tough young shoot, he thought, no, the apples are excellent, so round and firm. Then he went on looking. (43)*

You see Lo-Fu's shift here from a "vague" to a clear way of looking. Then "his conscious mind ceased wondering and, being an artist, his intensity and concentration were of a special order." (43) He uses these powers to study the branch in the most intense and exotic ways until the "leaves" were "continents'" with "rivers" and "many, many little fields." (44) It is an astonishing process, almost timeless, of falling in love, as a result of which "[h]e really did look at it. He really did see it." (44) Then he goes to his room where "his love, his apple branch, his beautiful subtle mistress, was his. And having possessed her with his great soul, she was his forever." (45)

Such a beautiful set of observations, both his and hers. But to me it ends puzzlingly, unsettlingly, disturbingly even, with the word "possessed." That word just stuck in my craw, and it's still stuck there. I have been re-reading *Notes* and especially this section over and over trying to find my way out my discomfort. All of this sensuous, gentle loving between Lo-Fu and his branch reduced, finally, to possession, ownership, why? At first, because Lo-Fu is figured male, I thought H.D. might simply be saying that that is the only possible outcome for a man, whether for cultural or biological reasons, no matter. It's just what men always end up doing with what they love. This was heartbreakingly depressing to me. I could not accept that. Then I remembered the note at the end of the book, in which it is made clear that the real Lo-Fu was in fact a woman. I was relieved, seizing on this as a way out of my depressing "gender" trap. But that, of course, only generalizes the problem. It doesn't solve it. So I kept re-reading and re-reading, trying to figure it, to re-figure it, literally.

Here's what I came to. H. D. had been writing about a certain kind of "love" from early in the book, exactly the

kind I have in mind these days when I think about my relationship with the trees, with the "things" that make up the world around us in general. Throughout, I hear H.D. arguing that poetry arises from and derives from our "falling in love" with things. I couldn't agree more. I started thinking about this sort of experience in a conscious way almost 50 years ago, walking down an empty street in Scranton, Pennsylvania, a rainy-gray afternoon, something of consequence on my mind, though I cannot recall what that might have been. I will say now I was "depressed," though that might go without saying if you ever walked down an empty street in Scranton in the late 1960s. The Northeastern Pennsylvania I grew up in was always characterized back then as a "depressed" area. I was in college before I realized that the term was being used economically rather than psychologically. So I'm walking distractedly, head down, and I pass over a manhole cover. For some reason, I noticed some faded patches and flecks of red and green paint all over it. I calculated unconsciously that at some point, many decades previously, when it was new, it must have been painted flamboyantly in those colors, more a work of art than a sewer lid. And suddenly I was stunned out of my inattention. I gazed at the manhole cover. I could not take my eyes off it. I literally fell in love with it, what it had been, what it was now, both so beautiful. I was enthralled. I don't know how long I stood there. I can see that manhole cover in my mind's eye right now, stunning.

I don't recall exactly, but I'm quite sure that whatever had been afflicting me right then was gone, that I was not depressed but ecstatic, how anyone feels when they fall in love. I didn't think much more about this experience until maybe a decade later, when I was at a point where I knew I was going to need "credentials," publications, to get and keep a job. I decided to write something about

the value, the real value, of poetry, for me, how it was more an approach toward the world, things, objects, people, everything, than a body of texts or a series of words. I called the piece "Thinking Poetry." Somewhere in it I made reference to this "falling in love" business and used my encounter with the manhole cover as an example. I got the piece published in a small journal that had "teaching" or "teachers" in its title. I don't have the piece, so I can't check. Well, you might ask, check your CV. But here's what happened with that. I got my first full-time job at a relatively elite college in 1977. I knew I would have to publish, and present my publications for others to evaluate, if I intended to sustain my position there. I had this one, "Thinking Poetry," going in. But after a while I started to think what the reaction among my senior colleagues would be to this upstart who had a habit of falling in love with manhole covers. Not good. Not good at all. You might say, well, maybe not. No, I knew these people. Not good. So I removed the line from my CV entirely. No one but me would ever know what I really thought about "thinking" poetry. I laugh now remembering all that. I got "terminated" (what a great word, so antiseptic and incendiary all at the same time!) there anyhow, for being, well, that's beside the point. It is, though, looking back from here, the "moment" in my career for which I am now most proud. It was exciting, interesting, hard. I stood up for something. And at least no one involved in that process ever got to say it was because I fell in love with manhole covers.

In any case, I have fallen in love with things, almost any category of thing you can think of, thousands and thousands of times in the interim, as I have with all the trees I meet on my daily walks. I've never regretted one of them. This is what gets me back to "possession." The thing about things is you cannot both love and possess

them. They are where they are. You can return to them. But they never belong to you. And here's the other thing, which I have realized in a deep way only on my walks this fall, all of these trees reaching out to me: Many of the things you fall in love with love you back. Really, truly, the best kind of love. Not all of them, of course. You can tell which way it is going if you pay attention. I believe, in retrospect, that the manhole cover I fell in love with also fell in love with me. I think it never forgot the day that guy fell in love with it. It has a good story to tell, too.

This sort of experience, these kinds of intimate relationships, are hard to account for, almost impossible to explain, in the context of postmodernist critical and philosophical systems. If you know something about them, you'll know exactly what I mean. If you don't, don't bother checking. Believe me. That's part of why I took that article off my CV. But they are not as hard to account for in the context of the now-emergent object-oriented otology movement. At the extreme, maybe, but possible. Again, if you read that work, I think you'll see how and why it's true. If you don't, don't worry about it. If you really want to know what I mean, read poetry, good poetry. Read H.D. She fell in love with things all the time. If you read enough of that, you will find yourself doing it without having had to read philosophy to learn how or explain why.

Very early in *Notes* H.D. introduces the theme of love via a reference to Socrates' famous second speech in the *Phaedrus*, when she refers to his way of orchestrating "vision" and "love:"

> *Socrates' whole doctrine of vision was a doctrine of love.*

*We must be "in love" before we can understand the mysteries of vision. (22)*

If you read his speech, true love actually changes how we see, or look at, the beloved, and our eyes are only opened this way if we are filled from without by a godly madness, are possessed in that way, outside-in. Everyone knows what such "loving eyes" look like in everyday terms. You don't have to read Plato or H.D. to know that. We have all witnessed them and displayed them at some point. For example: When Bridget was in elementary school, either Carol or I would pick her up after school so she wouldn't have to sit on a bus. Whenever possible, even if Carol was going to do that, which was most days, I'd go, too. Seems like overkill, I know, two parents with two cars to drive one kid two miles. But here's the thing: I did it because I couldn't wait to set eyes on her, and I truly believed she couldn't wait to set eyes on me and Carol. Parents had to wait for these pickups about 100 feet in front of the school, beside a flagpole, a small and devoted band of us who got to know one another there over time. When school let out, hundreds of kids from all grades would flood out to find buses or meet parents. I would have my eyes trained on this sea of faces, and as soon as Bridget came out the door hers would be the only face I could see. It would fill up the universe with a bright light. Her eyes would be trained toward the flagpole, and as soon as she saw us, her eyes would light up like the sun. You might say, how could anyone see that from 100 feet away? Well, that is exactly what "loving eyes" can and will do.

H.D. talks about some of the things her eyes love:

*The Delphic charioteer has, I have said, an almost hypnotic effect upon me: The bend of his arm, the knife cut of his chin; his feet, rather flat, slightly*

*separated, a firm pedestal for himself; the fall of his drapery in geometrical precision; and the angles of the ingatherings of the drapery at the waist. (24-26)*

Just a statue, but the most miniscule details of it so vividly observed, rendered, enlivened by her loving eyes.

Da Vinci, she goes on to say, "went mad if he saw a boy's face in Florence or a caged bird or a child with yellow hair that fell or stood up in tight whorls like the goldsmith work he had learned with Verrochio." (26) And Jesus, whom she calls "the Galilean" here and elsewhere, loves this way as well:

*The Galilean fell in love with things as well as people. He would fall in love with a sea-gull or some lake-heron that would dart up from the coarse lake grass, when Peter leapt out to drag his great boat on shore, or the plain little speckled backs of the birds bought in the market by the poor Jews. . . .*

*He looked at the blue grass-lily and the red-brown sand-lily that grew under the sheltered hot sand-banks in the southern winter for hours and hours. If he closed his eyes, he saw every vein and fleck of blue or vermillion. (28)*

If you want to know exactly what I mean by falling in love with things, well, here it is. I am not Jesus, to be sure. But this capacity of his is, I am sure, while it may begin with a "godly" possession, fully human. It is I would say what makes and keeps us human, ensconced intimately in a material world so vivid, so enchanting, why would we not take as much advantage of it as we can, before we are marched off to a heaven or a hell or a

nowhere that is spectral, disembodied, dull, dull, dull by comparison.

For H. D. this kind of love is the only way we can save our life here:

> *There are two ways of escaping the pain and despair of life, and of the rarest, most subtle dangerous and ensnaring gift that life can bring us, relationship with another person--love.*
>
> *One way is to kill that love in one's heart. To kill love—to kill life.*
>
> *The other way is to accept that love, to accept the snare, to accept the pricks, the thistle.*
>
> *To accept life—but that is dangerous.*
> *It is also dangerous not to accept life. (39)*

So now I am back to Lo-Fu, and I have answered my question, relieved my troubledness with the concept of "possession." The kind of love H.D., Lo-Fu and I are talking about is not ownership, domination, control. It is a being taken over, enthralled, from the outside in, by a godly madness that is only possible on a physical plane, this earth we need to stay at for whatever reason, for whatever time we're told. I know: In the sentence where that word appears, this meaning of possession is syntactically impossible. But I also know that if I could have a conversation with H.D. about this, she would say, "Oh, yes, I see, that's what I actually meant. Let me change that right now." I may be re-writing history here, but isn't that exactly what H.D. is doing when she calls a serpent a jellyfish? What she would want all of us to do when we find ourselves closed off for some reason from

what's truly good and true in the "reality" we have to live in? Re-write it. Right now. (76-86)

## Poem

I was just looking through my electronic files for the poem I wanted to use here and can't find it anywhere. It is old, so may exist only on a piece of paper somewhere in my closet, which I don't feel like digging through. What I found, though, was this poem, which has an imagistic aspect, though not with the layered tensions H. D. managed in her early work, in keeping with Pound's early definition of an image as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." My poem does not have an intellectual aspect. What was amazing to me though is I have no recollection whatsoever of having written it, and I like it. So, here it is, in lieu of the poem I cannot find:

*Night Life*

*a flare of street-*
*light: air*
*delirious with snow*

*each step a dent in*
*wind blowing*
*over what's left of*

*the night beside me*
*tucked in*
*luxuries of snowfall*

*two trees across*
*the street*
*lustrous to twig-tips*

*in tuxedos I pull tight*
*the bow*
*of my black tie*

*step out in fineries*
*sheer syllables*
*of silk riffle through*

*a sheen of street-*
*light still*
*delirious with snow*

## Not Wallace Stevens: Modes of Surrealism

I have been writing these inter-chapters out of their final sequence, depending on what I was thinking about at the time, most interested in, the way any writer writes. Some I would start on, falter, slide down the list for later. That's what has happened with Wallace Stevens, the last figure I'm writing about, even though he's not last in my sequence. I started writing on him at least three times, never got past the first few sentences, turned to someone else. I really love his poetry, and also his ideas. But I can't stand reading his prose. I feel about five sentences in that I have fallen into a spider web. I struggle to get my bearings, but just get more and more exhausted by it. Everything goes gray, I get sleepy, turn on the TV and take a nap. I've now reread the book I'll be writing about here, his famous book of prose *The Necessary Angel* twice in the last few weeks. I still feel like I want to find a further bottom to my list. But there isn't one, so I'm just going to wing it, do my best. Don't get me wrong, this is an amazing book, stunningly astute and beautiful. And his concept of imagination, which he counter-poses with "reality" in provocative ways, is right at the core of my story here, couldn't be better for my purposes. I think my resistance is just a temperamental thing. Like I always feel as if he's a bit over my head, out of my reach, I'm just not getting it. But here's what I have to say about what he has to say anyway. . .

I just skimmed the book again found a few good quotes and then thought better. I'm not a professor any more writing to other academics. I want this book to be legible to non-specialist readers. And I don't want to just "mail it in," go through the motions, just because I said to myself I would fill this space with something in particular. So I'm not going to write about Stevens. Basically just because I don't want to, which is all the reason I need these days.

Okay, so maybe he's the premier theorist of the imagination in the Modernist moment. I still don't want to. I'll provide one of his most famous poems at the end, which as I said I like a lot and are, to me, clearer statements about how the imagination interacts with reality, how they create and re-create one another, than any of the essays in this book, with the exception maybe of the first of his "Three Academic Pieces" and "Imagination as Value," which you can read if you want to.

So now I've decided instead to write about the rise of surrealism, which was happening at about the same time. I got that "link" in my head because I thought at one point in rereading Stevens' work that it sounded like a highly stylized mode of surrealism. And really, ultimately, surrealism had a far greater impact on the poetry of the latter part of the century than Stevens did by himself. In addition, I've always been bugged by the fact that writers throw that term around monolithically, as if surrealism is one thing, or a variety of amenable things. It is not, to me at least. There are a number of distinct kinds that poetry between 1950 and 2000 took advantage of in quite different ways. I'm going to write about two of them. One has its roots in the French tradition, one in the Spanish. Both of them rely on the metaphor of the "dream" to enact their method. A "dream" in its simplest form is a way to use outside material to do some meaningful work "inside." For the French, the vector is pointed in, for the Spanish it is pointed out. That's a big difference with significant ontological implications.

There are surrealist elements in the French poetic tradition going back at least to the mid-19th century, some of which Pound and Eliot tapped into. But the term itself, at least in its French version, came into currency via the "Manifesto of Surrealism" written by Andre Breton in 1924. He says early in the essay:

> *Beloved imagination, what I most like in you is your unsparing quality.*

*There remains madness, "the madness that one locks up," as it has aptly been described. That madness or another... And, indeed, hallucinations, illusions, etc., are not a source of trifling pleasure. The best controlled sensuality partakes of it . . . (all quotes from: http://www.exquisitecorpse.com/assets/manifesto_of_surrealism.pdf)*

So, imagination, madness, hallucinations, illusions. That's a pretty good "final four." He then offers a fierce, cogent critique of "the realistic attitude" which he equates with positivism, and the opening move to his alternative to it.

*We are still living under the reign of logic: this, of course, is what I have been driving at. But in this day and age logical methods are applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest. . . Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices. It was, apparently, by pure chance that a part of our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer -- and, in my opinion by far the most important part -- has been brought back to light. For this we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud. . . The imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights. If the depths of our mind contain within it strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface, or of waging a victorious battle against them, there is every reason to seize them . . .*

*Freud very rightly brought his critical faculties to bear upon the dream. It is, in fact, inadmissible that this considerable portion of psychic activity . . . has still today been so grossly neglected.*

Again, superstition, fancy, the forbidden, the dream, all legitimate counters to the overbearing "reign of logic" he so laments. The invocation of Freud, and the potentially "victorious battle" against surface concerns is especially telling. For Freud, a dream does not find its origin and meaning in external objects or facts. It culls what it needs from "out there," strips them of their organic connections to where they come from, and uses them to serve the purposes of what's inside, in his case the unconscious. In poetic terms, this is reminiscent of T.S Eliot's notion of the conscious kind of "dream work" he called the "objective correlative," (I provide his definition of this concept in my essay on his work) the object of which is pretty clear: I have something in there that I need to get out. It can't come out directly, so I have to build something to carry it out, in the hopes I can get it across to you. Let me assemble a "formula" for that. For Freud, this building goes on unconsciously instead of consciously, its vehicle the dream, which, with the help of an analyst, we can use to get something across to ourselves, something more than emotion in most cases. That's the advance along this Modernist line that Breton makes from Eliot. He calls it surrealism, which he defines this way:

> *SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express--verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner--the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.*

You can see the same dynamic here. Thought (absent imposed controls) is first, the word depicts it, via symbols which are connected to actual "things" out there in only the most tenuous way, if at all.

In the next section of the essay, "The Secrets of the Magical Surrealist Art," he prescribes this method of composition:

*After you have settled yourself in a place as favorable as possible to the concentration of your mind upon itself, have writing materials brought to you. Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everyone else. Keep reminding yourself that literature is one of the saddest roads that leads to everything. Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you're writing and be tempted to reread what you have written. The first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard. It is somewhat of a problem to form an opinion about the next sentence; it doubtless partakes both of our conscious activity and of the other, if one agrees that the fact of having written the first entails a minimum of perception. This should be of no importance to you, however; to a large extent, this is what is most interesting and intriguing about the Surrealist game. The fact still remains that punctuation no doubt resists the absolute continuity of the flow with which we are concerned, although it may seem as necessary as the arrangement of knots in a vibrating cord. Go on as long as you like. Put your trust in the inexhaustible nature of the murmur. If silence threatens to settle in if you should ever happen to make a mistake -- a mistake, perhaps due to carelessness -- break off without hesitation with an overly clear line. Following a word the origin of which seems suspicious to you, place any letter whatsoever, the letter "l" for example, always the letter "l," and bring the arbitrary back by making this letter the first of the following word.*

This is similar to the sort of "automatic writing" that was in vogue at the moment (Yeats practiced it) and influenced the Dada movement, also contemporaneous. You can see immediately how different this is from Wordsworth's method, or any of the

Romantic or Modernist systems I've described. The goal is to override not just intentionality but conscious intervention entirely, to dream awake. He goes on:

> *Not only does this unrestricted language, which I am trying to render forever valid, which seems to me to adapt itself to all of life's circumstances, not only does this language not deprive me of any of my means, on the contrary it lends me an extraordinary lucidity, and it does so in an area where I least expected it. I shall even go so far as to maintain that it instructs me and, indeed, I have had occasion to use surreally words whose meaning I have forgotten. I was subsequently able to verify that the way in which I had used them corresponded perfectly with their definition. This would leave one to believe that we do not "learn," that all we ever do is "relearn." There are felicitous turns of speech that I have thus familiarized myself with. And I am not talking about the poetic consciousness of objects which I have been able to acquire only after a spiritual contact with them repeated a thousand times over.*

His closing sentences seal the deal:

> *This summer the roses are blue; the wood is of glass. The earth, draped in its verdant cloak, makes as little impression upon me as a ghost. It is living and ceasing to live which are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere.*

No, he is clearly not talking about poetic consciousness of objects. Everything is vested in words, which is characteristically French. Existence is elsewhere. This is a long and wild argument, worth looking at just for its rhetoric, its dynamism. But the point is clear. The poem starts inside, finds automatized ways, via words, to get out, and then awaits, untranslatable in ordinary terms for the analyst-writer-reader to interpret, or if not that, just experience and enjoy, its own brand of non-Platonic madness.

On our side of the water, and later, the "New York School" that emerged in the 1950s flies generally under the French flag. Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, all those ebullient, colorful flashbulb images of the New York vibe and street scene, pre-Andy Warhol, are my favorite poems in this genre. Like this section from one called "Music," the poem that opens his iconic book:

*I have in my hands only 35c, it's so meaningless to eat!*
*and gusts of water spray over the basins of leaves*
*like the hammers of a glass pianoforte. If I seem to you*
*to have lavender lips under the leaves of the world, I must*
*tighten my belt.*
*It's like a locomotive on the march, the season of distress and*
*clarity*
*and my door is open to the evenings of midwinter's*
*lightly falling snow over the newspapers.*
*Clasp me in your handkerchief like a tear, trumpet*
*of early afternoon! in the foggy autumn.*
*As they're putting up the Christmas trees on Park Avenue*
*I shall see my daydreams walking by with dogs in blankets,*
*put to some use before all those coloured lights come on!*
*But no more fountains and no more rain,*
*and the stores stay open terribly late. (1)*

This has what we now call a "stream of consciousness" feel to it, maybe not Breton's surrealism in its purest state, but informed by it. John Ashberry, who comes along a little later, is probably the most famous of the New Yorkers, a sophisticated virtuoso in this vein, his career spanning 60 years. Here is a section of a poem called "Worsening Situation," from his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), a title that says a lot about his method:

*Like a rainstorm, he said, the braided colors*
*Wash over me and are no help. Or like one*
*at a feast who eats not, for he cannot choose*

*From among the smoking dishes. This severed hand*
*Stands for life, and wander as it will,*
*East or west, north or south, it is ever*
*A stranger who walks beside me. O seasons,*
*Booths, chaleur, dark-hatted charlatans*
*On the outskirts of some rural fete,*
*The name you drop and never say is mine, mine!*
*Some day I'll claim to you how all used up*
*I am because of you but in the meantime the ride*
*Continues. Everyone is along for the ride,*
*It seems. Besides, what else is there?*

I think you can see the ways the French model of surrealism informs this piece, as it does Ashberry's work generally.

The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets who emerged in the 1970s I would place in this tradition as well, at least in their early stages, though as the name suggests the focus is primarily on words as modes of estrangement, what Charles Bernstein later called in a long manifesto that rivals in strangeness Breton's "The Artifice of Absorption." The Freudian dream-stuff is gone. A poem becomes more like a work of abstract sculptural art. My favorite among these poets is Susan Howe, especially her early work. Here is a part of one of those poems, from *Cabbage Gardens* (1974):

*The past*
*will overtake*
*alien force*
*our house*
*formed*
*of my mind*
*to enter*
*explorer*
*in a forest*
*of myself*
*for all*
*my learning*

*Solitude*
*quiet*
*and quieter*
*fringe*
*of trees*
*by a river*
*bridges black*
*on the deep*
*the heaving sea*
*a watcher stands*
*to see her ship*
*winging away*
*Thick noises*
*merge in moonlight*
*dark ripples*
*dissolving*
*and*
*defining*
*spheres*
*and*
*snares*

This is a rung up from Ashberry and O'Hara in terms of "dissolving and defining," but to my way of reading shares the same lineage and ambition.

"But there is another method," as John Berryman said, quoting Olive Schreiner. Something akin to surrealism had been afoot in Spanish poetry for some time in the early part of the 20th century, and in the 1920s there were interactions with French Surrealism. But to me at least, the poetry coming out of Spain—Juan Ramon Jimenez, Federico Garcia Lorca, Antonia Machado during this era—looks and acts differently from the French, or from Pound's and Eliot's for that matter. The Spanish also use the figure of the "dream" to locate their approach, but for them the dream starts out there, in the world of things, then migrates inward, a kind of inhalation,

where it is transmuted into images, not thoughts, and slowly finds its way back out in words. The world is in the poem from beginning to end. And it is not automatized in any way. It actually shares some of the meditative aspects of Wordsworth's method.

I'm going to start with a piece by Jose Ortega y Gasset, the great Spanish philosopher of this era, called "The Dehumanization of Art," not so much because it details this ontology of poetics—it is primarily a critique of Romanticism and, to some extent Modernist (over)reactions to it, which he is hopeful are on the right track for what's next and new—but because it came out almost simultaneously (1925) with Breton's piece. There are moments in this long essay where what I'm trying to get at seems to rise up out of the mire of that critique. He says, for example:

> *It is a perfectly simple matter of optics. In order to see an object we have to adjust our eyes in a certain way. If our visual accommodation is inadequate we do not see the object, or we see it imperfectly. Imagine we are looking at a garden through a window. Our eyes adjust themselves so that our glance penetrates the glass without lingering upon it, and seizes upon the flowers and foliage. As the goal of vision towards which we direct our glance is the garden, we do not see the pane of glass and our gaze passes through it. The clearer the glass, the less we see it. But later, by making an effort, we can ignore the garden, and, by retracting our focus, let it rest on the window-pane. Then the garden disappears from our eyes, and all we see of it are some confused masses of colour which seem to adhere to the glass. Thus to see the garden and to see the window-pane are two incompatible operations: the one excludes the other and they each require a different focus. (68)*

He wants the glass in, but he doesn't kick the garden out entirely to get it there, it remains, "confused masses of colour." He goes on:

> *It will be said that it would be simpler to dispense altogether with those human forms – man, house, mountain – and construct utterly original figures. But this, in the first place, is impracticable. In the most abstract ornamental line a dormant recollection of certain 'natural' forms may linger tenaciously. In the second place – and this is more important – the art of which we are speaking is not only not human in that it does not comprise human things, but its active constituent is the very operation of dehumanizing. In his flight from the human, what matters to the artist is not so much reaching the undefined goal, as getting away from the human aspect which it is destroying. It is not a case of painting something totally distinct from a man or a house or a mountain, but of painting a man with the least possible resemblance to man; a house which conserves only what is strictly necessary to reveal its metamorphosis; a cone which has miraculously emerged from what was formerly a mountain. The aesthetic pleasure for today's artist emanates from this triumph over the human; therefore it is necessary to make the victory concrete and in each case display the victim that has been overcome. (71)*

Here is the Spanish "victory," the triumph over "the human" in its demoded Romantic forms, though, as I said, Ortega y Gasset seems to see this as an interim point on the way to something else. And his examples are, tellingly, visual—looking and painting—rather than verbal, differentiating his system fundamentally from the French, oriented outward rather than inward, toward things rather than words.

The main point is this: He doesn't want the things all the way out, he wants them to be seen, and that is only possible via modes of defamiliarization, sometimes extreme. That is the dreamwork of the artistic imagination. And then he says this, which takes, I think, an (un?)intentional poke at Breton's automatism:

> *It is commonly believed that to run away from reality is easy, whereas it is the most difficult thing in the world. It is easy to say or paint a thing which is unintelligible, completely lacking in meaning: it is enough to string together words without connection, or draw lines at random. But to succeed in constructing something which is not a copy of the 'natural' and yet possesses some substantive quality implies a most sublime talent. (72)*

Further:

> *'Reality' constantly lurks in ambush ready to impede the artist's evasion. (72) . . .*
>
> *Seeing is action at a distance. A projector is operating within a work of art both moving things further away and transfiguring them. On its magic screen we contemplate them banished from the earth, absolutely remote. When this de-realization is lacking it produces in us a fatal vacillation: we do not know whether we are living the things or contemplating them. (74)*

Even the paintings of the Spanish artist Salvador Dali, roughly contemporary, all those melting clocks and transmogrified animals and shapes, about as extreme as you think it might get in pushing the Freudian buttons, well, if you look at the paintings they have distinctly recognizable natural settings—the bare trees, the brown earth, the blue sky with puffy clouds—that have a Catalonian vibe to them. The world is still there, it is just dramatically estranged in a way that forces us to pay attention not only to it, in its

representational sense, as a scene, say, but to what it holds and withholds, its spirit, its imaginative grip on those who know it well and live in its grasp, what Lorca calls "duende," an earthy irrationality inflected with vitality, darkness and death.

In 1929 Dali would collaborate with Luis Buñuel on that classic Spanish surrealist short film *An Andalusian Dog*. If you have seen it, you will never forget the brief scene which shows a full moon in the sky, a thin cloud moving toward and then across it, and then jump-cuts to a straight razor slicing into a pried open eyeball. It may be a clunky way of demonstrating what I'm getting at here, that movement outside-in. But it works. You remember the eyeball, but you remember just as vividly the cloud that invoked it. The scene starts out there and then gets estranged. Not to get you to see the eyeball in a new way, but the moon. That kind of dreamwork is not Freudian nor is it Bretonian.

All of this got processed through Latin American literature, what became by the mid-50s something called "magical realism," a term, I just found out preparing this, that was first used by a German art critic, Franz Roh, in, you guessed it, 1925! I won't go into all of that because it pertains primarily to fiction. I want to talk instead about the subsequent transition into American poetics by one "school" of poets that was called variously the American surrealists, the "deep imagists," or, to use Robert Bly's term, the "leaping poets."

The deep image movement (the name I prefer) originated in the 1960s, and ran parallel with, but became more mainstream than, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. James Wright was the foundational poet, Bly the "theoretician." Bly's book *Leaping Poetry* (1972) expressly established the link to the Spanish poets I named above, one that Wright had put into practice and then made famous with his remarkable book *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963). Wright's early work was quite traditional looking and sounding, long lines, rhymes, formal, Frostian. After he read

the Spanish and Eastern European poets that enact the sort of dream state I describe above, all that changed. Here is an excerpt from a poem called "A Blessing:"

*Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,*
*Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.*
*And the eyes of those two Indian ponies*
*Darken with kindness. . .*

*They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.*
*There is no loneliness like theirs.*
*At home once more, they begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.*
*I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,*
*For she has walked over to me*
*And nuzzled my left hand.*
*She is black and white,*
*Her mane falls wild on her forehead,*
*And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear*
*That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.*
*Suddenly I realize*
*That if I stepped out of my body I would break*
*Into blossom.*

There is now a lovely fluidity to the movement. The world is all there, but deep and mysterious, having been dreamed back into itself via the poet's presence.

By the mid-70s this way of sounding became the default standard for mainstream American poetry for at least another 25 years as the field expanded and diversified and became much more inclusive in terms of race and gender. It also lent itself to powerful political poetry, as it did for the Spanish poets during their civil war in the 30s. Carolyn Forche (*The Country Between Us,* 1981) writing subtley of the horrors in El Salvador in the 70s and Jusef

Komunyakaa (*Dien Cai Dau*, 1988) writing lyrically about the horrors of the war in Vietnam, are two good examples of this method being used toward that end.

There was, as well, a mode of what I'd call surrealism (a stretch maybe, but there are similarities) that had its roots in Asian poetry, especially Chinese and Japanese traditions. Gary Snyder is the most prominent example of this, though those poetic sources were secondary influences for the deep imagists as well.

All of this is to say that surrealism, in its various modes, whether it used that name or not, was a defining force in most of the American poetry of the second half of the 20th century. Now that I've written this, a quick sketch at best, I can get back to Wallace Stevens, who was one of Ashberry's chief influences. Maybe Stevens would even approve of my approaching him along such an acute angle.

## Poem

I'll close with one of my favorite (and one of *the* most famous) of Stevens' poems, one that has a distinct surrealistic cast to it, at least in relation to that foundational conundrum of the role language has in negotiating meaningful interfaces between the inside and the outside, or to use his terms, imagination and reality:

*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird*

*I*

*Among twenty snowy mountains,*
*The only moving thing*
*Was the eye of the blackbird.*

*II*

*I was of three minds,*
*Like a tree*
*In which there are three blackbirds.*

*III*

*The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.*
*It was a small part of the pantomime.*

*IV*

*A man and a woman*
*Are one.*
*A man and a woman and a blackbird*
*Are one.*

*V*

*I do not know which to prefer,*
*The beauty of inflections*
*Or the beauty of innuendoes,*
*The blackbird whistling*
*Or just after.*

*VI*

*Icicles filled the long window*
*With barbaric glass.*
*The shadow of the blackbird*
*Crossed it, to and fro.*
*The mood*
*Traced in the shadow*
*An indecipherable cause.*

*VII*

*O thin men of Haddam,*
*Why do you imagine golden birds?*
*Do you not see how the blackbird*
*Walks around the feet*
*Of the women about you?*

*VIII*

*I know noble accents*
*And lucid, inescapable rhythms;*
*But I know, too,*
*That the blackbird is involved*
*In what I know.*

*IX*

*When the blackbird flew out of sight,*
*It marked the edge*
*Of one of many circles.*

*X*

*At the sight of blackbirds*
*Flying in a green light,*
*Even the bawds of euphony*
*Would cry out sharply.*

*XI*

*He rode over Connecticut*
*In a glass coach.*
*Once, a fear pierced him,*
*In that he mistook*
*The shadow of his equipage*
*For blackbirds.*

*XII*

*The river is moving.*
*The blackbird must be flying.*

*XIII*

*It was evening all afternoon.*
*It was snowing*
*And it was going to snow.*
*The blackbird sat*
*In the cedar-limbs.*

## Charles Olson

Charles Olson wrote an essay in 1950 that set the poetry world on its ear. Literally, as you'll see, or hear, below. Olson was the central ideologue in what was then the Black Mountain poetry school, which was the only one that was actually centered at a school. Literally: Black Mountain College in North Carolina, founded on the principles of John Dewey. This was the heyday of poetry "schools," aggregations of disparate, like-minded poets who flew under the same flag. You had the Beats, just a bit later in the 50s, congregating primarily in San Francisco; the New York school around the same time, which was, as advertised, based in New York; the Confessionals (that name wouldn't be assigned them until later; early on it was just, mostly, students of Robert Lowell), with a New England focal point; the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, a little later, which had hubs on both coasts; the deep imagists, a midwestern vibe. Those are the big ones. I came into the contemporary poetry scene in the heyday of all of this, the late 60s, reading these poets when many of them were quite well known. And by "well" I mean by young people who wrote poems and hoped to get known by joining one of those schools. Each school had an ideology, a method that you could endorse, practice, argue about, etc. Poets would "enroll" in one, "transfer" to a new one, just like real school. Even graduate, if you got big enough, and start one of your own. Amiri Baraka is a good example. He was by turns a Beat, a Black Mountainist, even to some, early on, still in his Leroi Jones days, in some respects a confessionalist. Then he became a force in his own right, too powerful a voice not to have a school of his own.

One of the things I distinctly remember was reading multiple poets in the same "school" and wondering what exactly it was that they had in common. They might all espouse the same creed, but they surely looked and sounded different on the

page. The Black Mountain school is a good example. You'd be hard-pressed to find two poets whose poems look and act more differently than those of Olson, long, aggressive epics with edges like broken glass and those of his co-theorist Robert Creeley, little, quiet poems, smooth, seemingly simple—until you heard him read, the best reader of his own work I ever heard, the voice, the persona, the performance, all of it, fantastic. I'm not even sure if "schools" are a thing anymore in the kingdom of poetry, I'm so far off the grid now. But it was an interesting dynamic back then.

Anyway, Olson published a very short essay, less than ten pages, in 1950 that transformed the Black Mountain poets into the Projectivists. It was titled "Projective Verse" and it's the piece that put that school in the poetry college on the larger map, and recruited countless new "students." The essay starts off mildly enough:

> *I want to do two things: first to try to show what projective or OPEN verse is, what it involves, in its act of composition, how, in distinction from the non-projective, it is accomplished; and II, suggest a few ideas about what stance toward reality brings such verse into being, what the stance does, both to the poet and to the reader. (the stance involves, for example, a change beyond, and larger than, the technical, and may, the way things look, lead to a new poetics and to new technical concepts from which some sort of drama, say, or of epic, perhaps, may emerge.) (15)*

Olson was just then setting to work on his own epic, which turned into the multi-volume *Maximus Poems* series, setting the standard for the plethora of "long poems" that erupted in the 70s and remained an aspirational goal for many poets—"I'm writing my long poem now" was the mantra—for a couple of generations.

Olson does in fact get technical in this essay, one of the reasons it became so influential I think: You could actually try it out. He says the poet who "works in the OPEN," which he calls "COMPOSITION BY FIELD" (he liked to capitalize his main points), instead of the "old" form-bases systems, must "learn" a few things first:

1. *the kinetics of the thing. A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge. . .*

2. *is the principle, the law . . .: FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT. . .*

3. *the process of the thing . . .: ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION . . . speed, the nerves, their speed, perceptions . . . must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER! (16-17)*

There's a lot of Williams here, you can see, the poetic calendar starting to shift in his favor, the OPEN, the "thing," the PERCEPTION, all features of Williams' figuration of the imagination, a term Olson doesn't use much, though it's what he's talking about, at least under the broad umbrella I've poked in the sand here. Olson later in the essay talks specifically about the proper poetic stance toward "OBJECTS," another keynote of Williams, who helped found the "objectivist" movement, though Olson preferred the term "objectism" to further highlight the object-orientation of his approach.

After a couple of pages of analysis of his system, with a few examples, Olson comes to what for me is his most radical core-set of propositions:

> *Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:*
>
> *the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE*
> *the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE (19)*

The second of these was the one that took off in relation to the mechanics of composition: line breaks determined by breath patterns, instead of the million other ways you can mark stops in an OPEN poem once rhyme and meter are no longer in control. To be honest, I thought even back then this was kind of a crock. Olson was maniacally careful in his work and may have been self-aware and self-disciplined enough to pay assiduous attention to his breathing while he wrote and read. And maybe some others, Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, the big names, though if you read them, they sure breathe differently, like hardly the same species. The poets I knew weren't. I'm not either. I'm lucky I can pay attention to my fingers typing. I think the breath-stop became a trope for most poets, more a way to justify a line-break after the fact than to regulate it *in situ*.

Nobody as best I could tell paid much attention to the first one, which is far more radical and innovative, hard even to think about let alone to do. It places the SEMANTIC (to borrow Olson's way of accentuating) center of a poem not at the level of sentence or phrase, the line or even word, all of the traditional ways of locating meaning or sense in linguistic constructs. But on the SYLLABLE, that single, distinct sound that has no intrinsic "meaning" in the conventional sense, on each little bit of noise as it gets extruded along the way. And the import of the syllable is not simply aural, physical, the vibrating wave part, as has always been the case for poetry, the interplay of sounds resonating in the EAR. It is intellectual: the HEAD!, he says. That is a completely unique way of thinking about the primary

work of poetic composition and reception. And even though I don't have a clear way of explaining how a single sound can carry intellectual import, I believe it, the ear connected to the tongue, the tongue connected to the larynx, and so on, until somewhere down the line you get to the HEAD! Because that's how I feel it when I write a poem (the head leads to the ear) and when I read one (the ear leads to the head.) ALWAYS.

I'm glad for that reason that I'm ending my "survey" with this piece. That line says the thing about poetry that, to me, makes it distinctive as a genre, whether your form is OPEN or CLOSED, and makes it most beautiful, enlivening, as an experience, its mode of embodiment, IMMEDIATE embodiment, INSTANTER, right now, whether you're making your own poem or receiving another's. Ending at 1950, the year after I was born, is probably wise for me. It is so hard to fathom things of this sort as they are originating in one's own time, the personal stakes so urgent. And, as I said, poetry is, historically, largely a young person's game. I am not young and try my best not to presume to speak for the young.

On the other hand, as I said in the preface, I have to deliver a book now with a passel of DWMs as the primary spokes-MEN. Just ten years after Olson's essay, the era of poetry inflected by gender and race took hold. Now the galaxy of primary talents, the "stars" in the American constellation of poetry, is not just dotted with, it is dominated by women and writers of color. I love so many of those poets and their poems, and as a not-D-yet WM, I am happy to step aside for them, let them speak for, and argue among themselves, write their own books on what poetry is, why people love it, and how to make it. I was never destined for greatness in any case, knew it right from the outset. I actually wanted to be and worked hard along my way through the professional world of the academy to stay "small," because I am by nature reclusive, do not like being looked at. And I've succeeded at it. Had I not, maybe I would have been harping about my "school" instead of enjoying and learning from all the

myriad and various poets of all ages that I have. I have that raucous chorus of voices in my HEAD-EAR all the time and I like it that way. Or I might not have read all these competing theories about how to make stuff like that, not just to create my own little things, get into "the best school," but to study at all the schools, starting with a one-on-one with Parmenides and ending (here at least) listening to Olson deliver an amazing lecture, one, now that I'm imagining it, Parmenides might have enjoyed, too. Same gnomic flamboyance.

## Poem

Here's a little chunk from a poem in Charles Olson's voluminous epic *The Maximus Poems*, just so you can hear what he sounds like, breath and syllables and all:

*Off-shore, by islands hidden in the blood*
*jewels & miracles, I, Maximus*
*a metal hot from boiling water, tell you*
*what is a lance, who obeys the figures of*
*the present dance*

*1*
*the thing you're after*
*may lie around the bend*
*of the nest (second, time slain, the bird! the bird!*
*And there! (strong) thrust, the mast! flight*
*(of the bird*
*o kylix, o*
*Antony of Padua*
*sweep low, o bless*

*the roofs, the old ones, the gentle steep ones*
*on whose ridge-poles the gulls sit, from which they depart,*

*And the flake-racks*
*of my city!*

*2*
*love is form, and cannot be without*
*important substance (the weight*
*say, 58 carats each one of us, perforce*
*our goldsmith's scale*

*feather to feather added*
*(and what is mineral, what*
*is curling hair, the string*
*you carry in your nervous beak, these*
*make bulk, these, in the end, are*
*the sum*

# Coda

I knew in mid-March, in my breath or in my ear or somewhere in my body, that this book was "done." Every book I write now I swear to myself is my last, that part of my work "done." I finish it and think "there's not a shred of anything left in there I want or need to say." I like my beef well-done, I mean charred. But even for me, I know there is a fine line between "well-done" and "cinders," one you hope not to cross, at least not too carelessly, in the most important areas of your life, which are to me "love" and "poetry." I endorse eccentricity, even extremism, in those areas, and in many others, as you know if you know me. But there is always a too far. One that calls into question everything that came before. A fall. I so hope this book is not that. And I so hope, if it's not, that I'll be wise enough to stop before I write the one that is.

Then again, as I said in the preface, maybe my real legacy will be to promote self-publication: as a way to control your intellectual "property," as a way avoid the intrusion of other minds on the dearest things you want to think and say, as a way to write and get out there as many books as you want as fast as you want. It is currently frowned upon, poo-pooed, as a mode of publication. And unless you're a better self-promoter than I am, you won't find much of an audience, at least in the shorter term, to hear what you have to say. But for someone like me, where I am right now, who I am right now, how I am right now, even why I am right now, it is perfect, a miracle proffered to me by the digital age.

I'm inclined to believe that it will in time become the norm for publishing intellectual and creative work. In the general marketplace, maybe 20 years hence. In the academic universe, so conservative by nature when it comes to the propagation and the legitimization of what counts as "knowledge," maybe 30 years or more. Oh, there will be a few big publishing houses around to handle the stars on either side of the creative/critical

divide in the promotion and tenure business. But there will be no room in their catalogue for people like me. There are way more people like me than there are stars, and we are worth listening to, too.

One of the salutary effects of all of this is it will compel every reader to become an astute critic, able to sort through and find what's best, what's really worth the time, amongst all of the inevitable chaff. Publishers do much of that work for us now, in the professional arena, though I've been reading their offerings for a long time and there is still a good deal of chaff there, as there is in any cultural moment, the wisdom of history not having had time to winnow it down to what's most worth conserving. And as you can see from what I've written, sometimes what's most worth conserving never gets past the gatekeepers of the moment in the first place. Whitman is as close to a self-publisher, at least early on, as you're likely to find in the 19th century. And Emily Dickinson spent 20+ years trying to get T. W. Higginson off his ass and into some publisher's office on her behalf. Without any success. She was "Nobody—too." Until she died, of course.

Maybe what I've done, the way I've done it these last 4 years, will encourage some aspiring writers to write the books they want to write, not only the ones the marketplace happens at the moment to favor, take their chances out there, straight up, the long view, have some courage, take the lumps, not fear risk, rejection, or just plain isolation. Because even from there, alone at home reading your own book like it's the most amazing thing that ever got made, you can sit by and with yourself in the most soothing and profound silence, like Wallace Stevens' "Snow Man,"

> *. . . who listens in the snow,*
> *And, nothing himself, beholds*
> *Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.*

I know. I've been doing that for a while. I've lived a good life that way, had a blast doing everything I got to do there. Including this book. I highly recommend it. The process, I mean, not necessarily the book. When you write entirely on your own, no consultation with others, no seeking advice on drafts, no publisher, no editor, no reviewer, it's really impossible to know if what you make will be worthwhiley around for more than a nano-second. But as Berryman told Merwin, "if you have to be sure don't write." I don't have to be sure.

## Poem

I've quoted from Wallace Stevens' great poem "The Snow Man" both early and late in the book, so I want to close with the final poem from my own *Snow Man*, a series of poems I wrote about 40 years ago, set in the arctic tundra. If there was ever a catalogue of poems for my mind of winter, these are it. I love those poems. I created a character for this series and followed him through his many stresses and distresses in that natural arena of deprivation and duress, a mirror image of what was happening in my own life and head at the time, so cold, solitary, searching, but strong, determined. This poem takes him down deep with bowhead whales, which, coincidentally, migrate every year to their feeding grounds right past where I now live. I think it says everything I have left to say about solitude, about hopefulness, about love, about the beautiful sounds that accompany us on our way here, some of which we can even make ourselves, those gifts from within and without that come when we address ourselves to the imagination, and about home, how it drives us forward, trying to reach it, no matter the season, no matter the weather:

*He dove down deep in the coastal*
*where bowheads sang*
*unearthly songs of hunger*
*and home and loved each other*
*with each rubber-hose bass-twang*
*note plucked*
*whole from*
*their hollow throats.*

*These were the voices*
*he dreamed of*
*having*
*and hearing.*

*He climbed on an ice-floe*
*and heard his own*
*words emerge*
*from pitching blacknesses*
*into the dim green light*
*of winter day*

*like the darkest shades of*
*emerald he remembered like*
*his hunger lunging*
*deeper like his*
*love-song headed*
*home.*

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