

HOW TO READ A POEM



And Fall in Love with Poetry

Edward Hirsch

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Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University
1317 West Pettigrew Street
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Preface

This is a book about reading poetry. It is also a book of readings. I have gathered together many poems I have loved over the years, and I have tried to let them show me how they should be read. I let the poems themselves act as my Virgilian guides. I have called often on the poets, my beloved immortals, to testify about poetry.

My idea is to present certain emblematic poems I care about deeply and to offer strategies for reading these poems. My readings are meant to be instructive and suggestive, not definitive, since poems are endlessly interpretable. There is always something about them that evades the understanding, and I have tried to remain aware that, as Paul Valéry has put it, “The power of verse is derived from an indefinable harmony between what it *says* and what it *is*. Indefinable is essential to the definition.”

Still, there are definite things that can be said about particular poems and I have tried to say some of them. I consider these poems emblematic because they suggest something crucial about the nature of poetry itself. I have trusted the individual poems to lead me to what those things are, to illuminate poetry. The lyric poem is the most intimate and volatile form of literary discourse and I have done my best to honor that intimacy, that volatility—the urgency that comes to me as poetry. I have listened hard and let the poems inhabit me. This book is a record of my initiations, encounters, responses, experiences. It is a record of my exaltations.

This is also a book of invitations and interactions, and I have sought to guide readers through the domain of my chosen art form. I have focused on the act of reading itself, on letting poems inhabit the reader’s consciousness, the reader’s body. I often move out from the individual poem to say something about the nature of poetic form or about the history of the particular form the poet employs or about where the poem stands in the body of the poet’s overall work. I speak of poems, of poets, both familiar and unknown. I chart the course of certain themes. Many subjects come into my purview, many more evade me, but always the individual poem stands as my touchstone, my talisman, my naked truth.

“Learn about pines from the pine, and about bamboo from the bamboo,” the seventeenth-century master of haiku, Matsuo Bashō, wrote in a series of insightful reflections on poetry. I would extend Bashō’s wisdom about nature, and about the poetry of nature in particular, to include the particular nature of poetry: learn about poetry from the poem . . .

In this book I’d like to make poems as available and accessible, as passionate and disturbing, as I feel them to be. Poetry is a form of necessary speech. People who care about it know that poems have magical potency. But now there are many people who have become so estranged from the devices and techniques of poetry, from poetic thinking, that they no longer recognize what they are reading. Reading poetry is endangered, I suppose, because reading itself is endangered in our culture now. I need not cite the statistics. And yet at least in poetry the problem is not a new one. It seems to me that there will always be terminally middle-aged thinkers like Cicero who convince themselves that poetry is dispensable and art is unnecessary. Seneca reports in the *Epistles* (49.5) that “Cicero said that even if his lifetime were to be doubled he would still not have time to waste on reading the lyric poets.” Cicero’s hostile indifference, so characteristic of politicians, should not be taken as an indictment of lyric poetry (the *Greek Anthology* survives Cicero’s indifference) but as testimony to Cicero’s own pedestrian mode of thinking. In America the old line repeats itself with a kind of tired regularity, and every few years some Cicero or other decides that poetry is dead. It is not. When Plato suggested banning the poets from the Republic he showed much better sense, for he recognized the revolutionary power of poetic thinking. He understood it well because he employed it so successfully himself. That’s because he is the philosopher most given to transport.

“Tell me a story of deep delight,” Robert Penn Warren writes at the end of *Audubon: A Vision*. In this book I have tried to tell such a story. In the first chapter I lay out some of the tenets of the exchange between reader and writer in a poem textualized between speech and song. I do some necessary groundwork and distinguish some key terms, key features, of lyric poetry. I offer a kind of road map, an overview, that will resonate through subsequent chapters and, I hope, enable readers to experience poems more fully, more deeply, and more thoughtfully, though I believe that in the end poems strike something deeper than thought itself. Thereafter, I tend always to focus on unpacking individual poems, letting the is-

sues of poetry emerge in the process. And I keep finding metaphors for the mutuality of the relationship between writer and reader.

Throughout this book I am enacting the role of the reader and hope you will unite with me. I seek to guide others as I myself have been guided by various strong readers through the sometimes challenging devices and difficulties, the splendid elaborations of poetry. One seeks to become the kind of reader who enters an area of expertise and yet still remains open to the spacious unfolding—the shining body—of the poem itself. It is the technical accomplishment—the actual physical body—of the poem that delivers our ecstatic response to it. This book is designed to give the reader the deepest access to all the ways of a poem's working. I'd like to believe that the ongoing initiation into art deepens our capacity for experiencing ourselves as well as others, thereby deepening our capacity for personhood, our achievement of humanity.

The nature of the poems I write about in this book has certainly affected the way in which I write about them. I have tried to be as clear as possible, to sound what James Wright calls “the pure clear word,” but I have also tried to give my prose the wings that poetry deserves. I have sought to restore the aura of sacred practice that accompanies true poetic creation, to honor both the rational and the irrational elements in poetry. I would restore the burden of the mystery. I would illuminate an experience that takes us to the very heart of being.

1



Message in a Bottle

Heartland

Read these poems to yourself in the middle of the night. Turn on a single lamp and read them while you're alone in an otherwise dark room or while someone else sleeps next to you. Read them when you're wide awake in the early morning, fully alert. Say them over to yourself in a place where silence reigns and the din of the culture—the constant buzzing noise that surrounds us—has momentarily stopped. These poems have come from a great distance to find you. I think of Malebranche's maxim, "Attentiveness is the natural prayer of the soul." This maxim, beloved by Simone Weil and Paul Celan, quoted by Walter Benjamin in his magisterial essay on Franz Kafka, can stand as a writer's credo. It also serves for readers. Paul Celan said:

A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense, too, are under way: they are making toward something.

Imagine you have gone down to the shore and there, amidst the other debris—the seaweed and rotten wood, the crushed cans and dead fish—you find an unlikely looking bottle from the past. You bring it home and

discover a message inside. This letter, so strange and disturbing, seems to have been making its way toward someone for a long time, and now that someone turns out to be you. The great Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, destroyed in a Stalinist camp, identified this experience. "Why shouldn't the poet turn to his friends, to those who are naturally close to him?" he asked in "On the Addressee." But of course those friends aren't necessarily the people around him in daily life. They may be the friends he only hopes exist, or will exist, the ones his words are seeking. Mandelstam wrote:

At a critical moment, a seafarer tosses a sealed bottle into the ocean waves, containing his name and a message detailing his fate. Wandering along the dunes many years later, I happen upon it in the sand. I read the message, note the date, the last will and testament of one who has passed on. I have the right to do so. I have not opened someone else's mail. The message in the bottle was addressed to its finder. I found it. That means, I have become its secret addressee.

Thus it is for all of us who read poems, who become the secret addressees of literary texts. I am at home in the middle of the night and suddenly hear myself being called, as if by name. I go over and take down the book—the message in the bottle—because tonight I am its recipient, its posterity, its heartland.

To the Reader Setting Out

The reader of poetry is a kind of pilgrim setting out, setting forth. The reader is what Wallace Stevens calls "the scholar of one candle." Reading poetry is an adventure in renewal, a creative act, a perpetual beginning, a rebirth of wonder. "Beginning is not only a kind of action," Edward Said writes in *Beginnings*, "it is also a frame of mind, a kind of work, an attitude, a consciousness." I love the frame of mind, the playful work and working playfulness, the form of consciousness—the dreamy attentiveness—that come with the reading of poetry.

Reading is a point of departure, an inaugural, an initiation. Open the Deathbed Edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1891–1892) and you immediately

encounter a series of “Inscriptions,” twenty-six poems that Walt Whitman wrote over a period of three decades to inscribe a beginning, to introduce and inaugurate his major work, the one book he had been writing all his life. Beginning my own book on the risks and thralls, the particular enchantments, of reading poetry, I keep thinking of Whitman’s six-line poem “Beginning My Studies.”

Beginning my studies the first step pleas’d me so much,
The mere fact consciousness, these forms, the power of motion,
The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,
The first step I say awed me and pleas’d me so much,
I have hardly gone and hardly wish’d to go any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic songs.

I relish the way that Whitman lingers in this one-sentence poem over the very first step of studying, the mere fact—the miracle—of consciousness itself, the joy of encountering “these forms,” the empowering sense of expectation and renewal, the whole world blooming at hand, the awakened mental state that takes us through our senses from the least insect to the highest power of love. We can scarcely turn the page, so much do we linger with pleasure over the ecstatic beginning. We are instructed by Whitman in the joy of starting out that the deepest spirit of poetry is awe.

Poetry is a way of inscribing that feeling of awe. I don’t think we should underestimate the capacity for tenderness that poetry opens within us. Another one of the “Inscriptions” is a two-line poem that Whitman wrote in 1860. Called simply “To You,” it consists in its entirety of two rhetorical questions:

Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me,
why should you not speak to me?
And why should I not speak to you?

It seems entirely self-evident to Whitman that two strangers who pass each other on the road ought to be able to loiter and speak, to connect. Strangers who communicate might well become friends. Whitman refuses to be bound, to be circumscribed, by any hierarchical or class distinctions. One notices how naturally he addresses the poem not to the

people around him, whom he already knows, but to the “stranger,” to the future reader, to you and me, to each of us who would pause with him in the open air. Let there be an easy flow—an affectionate commerce—between us.

Here is one last “Inscription,” the very next poem in *Leaves of Grass*. It’s called “Thou Reader” and was written twenty-one years after “To You.”

Thou reader throbbest life and pride and love the same as I,
Therefore for thee the following chants.

I am completely taken by the way that Whitman always addresses the reader as an equal, as one who has the same strange throb of life he has, the same pulsing emotions. There’s a desperate American friendliness to the way he repeatedly dedicates his poems to strangers, to readers and poets to come, to outsiders everywhere. Whoever you are, he would embrace you. I love the deep affection and even need with which Whitman dedicates and sends forth his poems to the individual reader. He leaves each of us a gift. *To you*, he says, *the following chants*.

In the Beginning Is the Relation

The message in the bottle is a lyric poem and thus a special kind of communiqué. It speaks out of a solitude to a solitude; it begins and ends in silence. We are not in truth conversing by the side of the road. Rather, something has been written; something is being read. Language has become strange in this urgent and oddly self-conscious way of speaking across time. The poem has been (silently) en route—sometimes for centuries—and now it has signaled me precisely because I am willing to call upon and listen to it. Reading poetry is an act of reciprocity, and one of the great tasks of the lyric is to bring us into right relationship to each other. The relationship between writer and reader is by definition removed and mediated through a text, a body of words. It is a particular kind of exchange between two people not physically present to each other. The lyric poem is a highly concentrated and passionate form of communication between strangers—an immediate, intense, and unsettling form of literary discourse. Reading poetry is a way of connecting—

through the medium of language—more deeply with yourself even as you connect more deeply with another. The poem delivers on our spiritual lives precisely because it simultaneously gives us the gift of intimacy and interiority, privacy and participation.

Poetry is a voicing, a calling forth, and the lyric poem exists somewhere in the region—the register—between speech and song. The words are waiting to be vocalized. The greatest poets have always recognized the oral dimensions of their medium. For most of human history poetry has been an oral art. It retains vestiges of that orality always. Writing is not speech. It is graphic inscription, it is visual emblem, it is a chain of signs on the page. Nonetheless: “I made it out of a mouthful of air,” W. B. Yeats boasted in an early poem. As, indeed, he did. As every poet does. So, too, does the reader make, or remake, the poem out of a mouthful of air, out of breath. When I recite a poem I reinhabit it, I bring the words off the page into my own mouth, my own body. I become its speaker and let its verbal music move through me as if the poem is a score and I am its instrumentalist, its performer. I let its heartbeat pulse through me as embodied experience, as experience embedded in the sensuality of sounds. The poem implies mutual participation in language, and for me, that participation mystique is at the heart of the lyric exchange.

Many poets have embraced the New Testament idea that “In the beginning was the Word,” but I prefer Martin Buber’s notion in *I and Thou* that “In the beginning is the relation.” The relation precedes the Word because it is authored by the human. The lyric poem may seek the divine but it does so through the medium of a certain kind of human interaction. The secular can be made sacred through the body of the poem. I understand the relationship between the poet, the poem, and the reader not as a static entity but as a dynamic unfolding. An emerging sacramental event. A relation between an I and a You. A relational process.

Stored Magic

What kind of exchange are we dealing with? The lyric poem seeks to mesmerize time. It crosses frontiers and outwits the temporal. It seeks to defy death, coming to disturb and console you. (“These Songs are not meant to be understood, you understand,” John Berryman wrote in one of his last Dream Songs: “They are only meant to terrify & comfort.”)

The poet is incited to create a work that can outdistance time and surmount distance, that can bridge the gulf—the chasm—between people otherwise unknown to each other. It can survive changes of language and in language, changes in social norms and customs, the ravages of history. Here is Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*:

True poetic practice implies a mind so miraculously attuned and illuminated that it can form words, by a chain of more-than-coincidences, into a living entity—a poem that goes about on its own (for centuries after the author's death, perhaps) affecting readers with its stored magic.

I believe such stored magic can author in the reader an equivalent capacity for creative wonder, creative response to a living entity. (Graves means his statement literally.) The reader completes the poem, in the process bringing to it his or her own past experiences. You are reading poetry—I mean really reading it—when you feel encountered and changed by a poem, when you feel its seismic vibrations, the sounding of your depths. “There is no place that does not see you,” Rainer Maria Rilke writes at the earth-shattering conclusion of his poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo”: “You must change your life.”

The Immense Intimacy, the Intimate Immensity

The profound intimacy of lyric poetry makes it perilous because it gets so far under the skin, into the skin. “For poems are not, as people think, simply emotions (one has emotions early enough)—they are experiences,” Rilke wrote in a famous passage from *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. I am convinced the kind of experience—the kind of knowledge—one gets from poetry cannot be duplicated elsewhere. The spiritual life wants articulation—it wants embodiment in language. The physical life wants the spirit. I know this because I hear it in the words, because when I liberate the message in the bottle a physical—a spiritual—urgency pulses through the arranged text. It is as if the spirit grows in my hands. Or the words rise in the air. “Roots and wings,” the Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez writes, “But let the wings take root and the roots fly.”

There are people who defend themselves against being “carried away” by poetry, thus depriving themselves of an essential aspect of the experience. But there are others who welcome the transport poetry provides. They welcome it repeatedly. They desire it so much they start to crave it daily, nightly, nearly abject in their desire, seeking it out the way hungry people seek food. It is spiritual sustenance to them. Bread and wine. A way of transformative thinking. A method of transfiguration. There are those who honor the reality of roots and wings in words, but also want the wings to take root, to grow into the earth, and the roots to take flight, to ascend. They need such falling and rising, such metaphorical thinking. They are so taken by the ecstatic experience—the overwhelming intensity—of reading poems they have to respond in kind. And these people become poets.

Emily Dickinson is one of my models of a poet who responded completely to what she read. Here is her compelling test of poetry:

If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire
can ever warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if
the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These
are the only way I know. Is there any other way.

Dickinson recognizes true poetry by the extremity—the actual physical intensity—of her response to it. It’s striking that she doesn’t say she knows poetry because of any intrinsic qualities of poetry itself. Rather, she recognizes it by contact; she knows it by what it does to her, and she trusts her own response. Of course, only the strongest poetry could effect such a response. Her aesthetic is clear: always she wants to be surprised, to be stunned, by what one of her poems calls “Bolts of Melody.”

Dickinson had a voracious appetite for reading poetry. She read it with tremendous hunger and thirst—poetry was sustenance to her. Much has been made of her reclusion, but, as her biographer Richard Sewall suggests, “She saw herself as a poet in the company of the Poets—and, functioning as she did mostly on her own, read them (among other reasons) for company.” He also points to Dickinson’s various metaphors for the poets she read. She called them “the dearest ones of time, the strongest friends of the soul,” her “Kinsmen of the Shelf,” her “enthraling friends, the immortalities.” She spoke of the poet’s “venerable

Hand” that warmed her own. Dickinson was a model of poetic responsiveness because she read with her whole being.

One of the books Emily Dickinson marked up, Ik Marvel’s *Reveries of a Bachelor* (1850), recommends that people read for “soul-culture.” I like that dated nineteenth-century phrase because it points to the depth that can be shared by the community of solitaries who read poetry. I, too, read for soul-culture—the culture of the soul. That’s why the intensity of engagement I have with certain poems, certain poets, is so extreme. Reading poetry is for me an act of the most immense intimacy, of intimate immensity. I am shocked by what I see in the poem but also by what the poem finds in me. It activates my secret world, commands my inner life. I cannot get access to that inner life any other way than through the power of the words themselves. The words pressure me into a response, and the rhythm of the poem carries me to another plane of time, outside of time.

Rhythm can hypnotize and alliteration can be almost hypnotic. A few lines from Tennyson’s *The Princess* can still send me into a kind of trance:

The moan of doves in immemorial elms
And murmurings of innumerable bees.

And I can still get lost when Hart Crane links the motion of a boat with an address to his lover in part 2 of “Voyages”:

And onward, as bells off San Salvador
Salute the crocus lustres of the stars,
In these poinsettia meadows of her tides,—
Adagios of islands, O my Prodigal,
Complete the dark confessions her veins spell.

The words move ahead of the thought in poetry. The imagination loves reverie, the daydreaming capacity of the mind set in motion by words, by images.

As a reader, the hold of the poem over me can be almost embarrassing because it is so childlike, because I need it so much to give me access

to my own interior realms. It plunges me into the depths (and poetry is the literature of depths) and gives a tremendous sense of another world growing within. ("There is another world and it is in this one," Paul Éluard wrote.) I need the poem to enchant me, to shock me awake, to shift my waking consciousness and open the world to me, to open me up to the world—to the word—in a new way. I am pried open. The spiritual desire for poetry can be overwhelming, so much do I need it to experience and name my own perilous depths and vast spaces, my own well-being. And yet the work of art is beyond existential embarrassment. It is mute and plaintive in its calling out, its need for renewal. It needs a reader to possess it, to be possessed by it. Its very life depends upon it.

Mere Air, These Words, but Delicious to Hear

I remember once walking through a museum in Athens and coming across a tall-stemmed cup from ancient Greece that has Sappho saying, "Mere air, these words, but delicious to hear." The phrase inscribed into the cup, translated onto a museum label, stopped me cold. I paused for a long time to drink in the strange truth that all the sublimity of poetry comes down in the end to mere air and nothing more, to the sound of these words and no others, which are nonetheless delicious and enchanting to hear. Sappho's lines (or the lines attributed to her) also have a lapidary quality. The phrase has an elegance suitable for writing, for inscription on a cup or in stone. Writing fixes the evanescence of sound. It holds it against death.

The sound of the words is the first primitive pleasure in poetry. "In poetry," Wallace Stevens asserted, "you must love the words, the ideas and images and rhythms with all your capacity to love anything at all" ("Adagia"). Stevens lists the love of the words as the first condition of a capacity to love anything in poetry at all because it is the words that make things happen. There are times when I read a poem and can feel the syllables coming alive in my mouth, the letters enunciated in the syllables, the syllables coming together as words, the words forming into a phrase, the phrase finding a rhythm in the line, in the lines, in the shape of the words crossing the lines into a sentence, into sentences. I feel the words creating a rhythm, a music, a spell, a mood, a shape, a form. I hear

the words coming off the page into my own mouth—in transit, in action. I generate—I re-create—the words incantatory, the words liberated and self-reflexive. Words rising from the body, out of the body. An act of language paying attention to itself. An act of the mind.

“Mere air, these words, but delicious to hear.” In poetry the words enact—they make manifest—what they describe. This is what Gerard Manley Hopkins calls “the roll, the rise, the carol, the creation.” Indeed, one hears in Hopkins’s very phrase the trills or rolled consonants of the letter *r* reverberating through all four words, the voiced vowels, the *r-o-l* of “roll” echoing in the back of “carol,” the alliterative *cs* building a cadence, hammering it in, even as the one-syllable words create a rolling, rising effect that is slowed down by the rhythm of the multisyllabic words, the caroling creation. The pleasure all this creates in the mouth is intense. “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” I read Hopkins’s poems and feel the deep joy of the sounds creating themselves (“What is all this juice and all this joy?”), the nearly buckling strain of so much drenched spirit, “the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!”

The poem is an act beyond paraphrase because what is being said is always inseparable from the way it is being said. Osip Mandelstam suggested that if a poem can be paraphrased, then the sheets haven’t been ruffled, poetry hasn’t spent the night. The words are an (erotic) visitation, a means to an end, but also an end in and of themselves. The poet is first of all a language worker. A maker. A shaper of language. With Heinrich Heine, the linguist Edward Sapir affirmed in his book *Language*, “one is under the illusion that the universe speaks German.” With Shakespeare, one is under the impression that it speaks English. This is at the heart of the Orphic calling of the poet: to make it seem as if the very universe speaks and reveals itself through the mother tongue.

In Plain American Which Cats and Dogs Can Read!

The lyric poem walks the line between speaking and singing. (It also walks the line between the conventions of poetry and the conventions of grammar.) Poetry is not speech exactly—verbal art is deliberately different than the way that people actually talk—and yet it is always in relationship to speech, to the spoken word. “It has to be living, to learn the

speech of the place,” as Wallace Stevens puts it in his poem “Of Modern Poetry.” W. B. Yeats called a poem “an elaboration of the rhythms of common speech and their association with profound feeling” (“Modern Poetry”). W. H. Auden said: “In English verse, even in Shakespeare’s grandest rhetorical passages, the ear is always aware of its relation to everyday speech” (“Writing”). I’m reminded of the many poems in the American vernacular—from Walt Whitman to William Carlos Williams (“The Horse Show”), Frank O’Hara (“Having a Coke with You”), and Gwendolyn Brooks (“We Real Cool”)—that give the sensation of someone speaking in a texturized version of American English, that create the impression of letters written, as Marianne Moore joyfully puts it, “not in Spanish, not in Greek, not in Latin, not in shorthand, / but in plain American which cats and dogs can read!” A demotic linguistic vitality—what Williams calls “the speech of Polish mothers”—is one of the pleasures of the American project in poetry.

Here is the opening of Randall Jarrell’s poem “Next Day”:

Moving from Cheer to Joy, from Joy to All,
I take a box
And add it to my wild rice, my Cornish game hens.
The slacked or shorted, basketed, identical
Food-gathering flocks
Are selves I overlook. Wisdom, said William James,

Is learning what to overlook. And I am wise
If that is wisdom.

One hears in this poem the plaintive, intelligent voice of a suburban housewife who knows she has become invisible, who wants only to be *seen* and heard. What particularly marks the poem as a verbal construct is the self-conscious treatment of the words themselves, the way the words behave in rhythmic lines and shapely stanzas. There’s the delightful pun on the names of household detergents, the play off “hens” and “flocks,” the acute way the woman sums up her companions in the supermarket, how she pivots on the word “overlook” and ruefully quotes William James’s pragmatic American notion of “wisdom.” I’ve always been

touched by the way Jarrell animates the woman's voice in this poem, how he inscribes his own voice into her voice and captures the reality of someone who is exceptional, commonplace, solitary.

Give a Common Word the Spell

The medium of poetry is language, our common property. It belongs to no one and to everyone. Poetry never entirely loses sight of how the language is being used, fulfilled, debased. We ought to speak more often of the *precision* of poetry, which restores the innocence of language, which makes the language visible again. Language is an impure medium. Speech is public property and words are the soiled products, not of nature, but of society, which circulates and uses them for a thousand different ends.

Poetry charts the changes in language, but it never merely reproduces or recapitulates what it finds. The lyric poem defamiliarizes words, it wrenches them from familiar or habitual contexts, it puts a spell on them. The lyric is cognate with those childish forms, the riddle and the nursery rhyme, with whatever form of verbal art turns language inside out and draws attention to its categories. As the eighteenth-century English poet Christopher Smart put it, freely translating from Horace's *Art of Poetry*:

It is exceedingly well
To give a common word the *spell*
To greet you as intirely new.

The poem refreshes language, it estranges and makes it new. ("But if the work be new, / So shou'd the song be too," Smart writes.) There is a nice pun on the word *spell* in Smart's Horatian passage since, as tribal peoples everywhere have believed, the act of putting words in a certain rhythmic order has magical potency. That power can only be released when the spell is chanted aloud. I'm reminded, too, that the Latin word *carmen*, which means "song" or "poem," has attracted English poets since Sidney because of its closeness to the word *charm*, and, in fact, in the older Latin texts it also means a magic formula, an incantation meant to make things happen, to cause action (Andrew Welsh, *Roots of Lyric*). And a charm is only effective when it is spoken or sung, incanted.

The lyric poem separates and uproots words from the daily flux and

flow of living speech but it also delivers them back—spelled, changed, charmed—to the domain of other people. As Octavio Paz puts it in *The Bow and the Lyre*:

Two opposing forces inhabit the poem: one of elevation or uprooting, which pulls the word from the language: the other of gravity, which makes it return. The poem is an original and unique creation, but it is also reading and recitation: participation. The poet creates it; the people, by recitation, re-create it. Poet and reader are two moments of a single reality.

Metaphor: A Poet is a Nightingale

The transaction between the poet and the reader, those two instances of one reality, depends upon figurative language—figures of speech, figures of thought. Poetry evokes a language that moves beyond the literal and, consequently, a mode of thinking that moves beyond the literal. “There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry,” Robert Frost confesses in “The Constant Symbol,” “but chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority.” Poetry is made of metaphor. It is a collision, a collusion, a compression of two unlike things: A is B. The term *metaphor* comes from the Latin *metaphora*, which in turn derives from the Greek *metapherein*, meaning “to transfer,” and, indeed, a metaphor transfers the connotations or elements of one thing (or idea) to another. It is a transfer of energies, a mode of interpenetration, a matter of identity and difference. Each of these propositions about the poem depends upon a metaphor: *The poem is a capsule where we wrap up our punishable secrets* (William Carlos Williams). *A poem is a well-wrought urn* (Cleanth Brooks), *a verbal icon* (W. K. Wimsatt). *A poem is a walk* (A. R. Ammons); *a poem is a meteor* (Wallace Stevens). *A poem might be called a pseudo-person. Like a person it is unique and addresses the reader personally* (W. H. Auden). A poem is a hand, a hook, a prayer. It is a soul in action.

When Paul Celan wrote, “A poem . . . can be a message in a bottle,” he didn’t think literally that he would be dropping his poems into the Seine (though he was writing them from Paris) and that someone might find them floating ashore on the banks of the Chicago River (though I

was living in Chicago when I first read him). What did he mean then? This book tries to tease out the implications.

The language of poetry, Shelley claims in his *Defence of Poetry*, “is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension.” Shelley is suggesting that the poet creates relations between things unrecognized before, and that new metaphors create new thoughts and thus revitalize language. In his fine book *Poetic Diction*, Owen Barfield remarks that he would like to change one detail in Shelley’s phrase, to alter “before unapprehended relations” to “forgotten relations.” That’s because poetry delivers back an archaic knowledge, an ancient and vitally metaphorical way of thinking, now mostly lost. The poet, by creating anew, is also likely to be “restoring something old.”

The oldest English poetry, for example (the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and poems written in other old Germanic languages), has a number of poetic tropes that enable the poet to describe things at an angle, without naming them, and thus invite the listener to imaginatively construct them. The most widespread are known as *kennings*; these occur in compounds, such as calling the sea *swanrad* (“swan-road”) or *winegeard* (“home of the winds”). The word *ken*, meaning “to know,” is still used in Scottish dialects, and indeed such figurative language is a way of knowing.

What especially concerns me here is how the reader actively participates in the making of meaning through metaphor, in thinking through the relation of unlike things. How do we apprehend these previously unapprehended or forgotten relations: in ironic tension, in exact correspondence, in fusion? The meaning emerges as part of a collaboration between writer and reader. Out of this interactive process comes the determination to what extent a metaphor *works*, where it breaks down, to what extent a poem can be a message in a bottle, or a machine made out of words (Williams), or a derangement of the senses (Rimbaud); to what extent “a book is a cubic piece of burning, smoking conscience—and nothing else” (Boris Pasternak); to what extent, as Shelley writes,

A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.

The singing of a nightingale becomes a metaphor for writing poetry here, and listening to that bird (that natural music) becomes a metaphor for reading it. One of the premises of Shelley's metaphor is that the poet "sings" in "solitude" without any consideration for an audience and that the audience—"his auditors"—responds to the work of an "unseen musician." They can't actually *see* him because they are physically removed from each other. And yet they are brought into mysterious (visionary) relation.

The philosopher Ted Cohen suggests that one of the main points of metaphor is "the achievement of intimacy." Cohen argues in "Metaphor and the Cultivation of Intimacy" that the maker and the appreciator of a metaphor are brought into deeper relationship with one other. That's because the speaker issues a concealed invitation through metaphor which the listener makes a special effort to accept and interpret. Such a "transaction constitutes the acknowledgment of a community." This notion perfectly describes how the poet enlists the reader's intellectual and emotive involvement and how the reader actively participates in making meaning in poetry. Through this dynamic and creative exchange the poem ultimately engages us in something deeper than intellect and emotion. And through this ongoing process the reader becomes more deeply initiated into the sacred mysteries of poetry.

Epic, Drama, Lyric: Be Plural Like the Universe!

There is a lively history of poetry, and poetry keeps engaging, fulfilling, and transgressing that history. Each of us becomes a more effective and responsive reader as we learn more about poetry's past and its forms. Literary works have conventionally been divided into three generic types or classes, dependent upon who is supposedly speaking:

- epic or narrative*: in which the narrator speaks in the first person, then lets the characters speak for themselves;
- drama*: in which the characters do all the talking;
- lyric*: uttered through the first person.

This useful but flawed textbook division evolved from Aristotle's fundamental distinction between three generic categories of poetic literature:

epic, drama, and lyric. All were radically presentational: recited, spoken, chanted, sung. “Like all well-conceived classifications,” the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa writes in “Toward Explaining Heteronymy,”

this one is useful and clear; like all classifications, it is false. The genres do not separate out with such essential facility, and, if we closely analyze what they are made of, we shall find that from lyric poetry to dramatic there is one continuous gradation. In effect, and going right to the origins of dramatic poetry—Aeschylus, for instance—it will be nearer the truth to say that what we encounter is lyric poetry put into the mouths of different characters.

Pessoa himself wrote poems under three different “heteronyms,” creating three distinct bodies of work, all distinguished, under the signature of three different fictive “authors.” He also wrote poems under his own name—equally dramatic, equally personal. I think we ought to take to heart his Whitmanesque motto, “Be plural like the universe!”

Aristotle’s traditional groupings more or less held until the eighteenth century, but since then the epic and the novel, the drama, and the lyric have continually shadowed and shaded each other. They have blurred, transmuted, crossed boundaries. Readers experience how the narrative or storylike element drives lyric poems; how the musical element, the rhythm of emotions, charges narrative poems; how the element of dramatic projection empowers many narratives, many lyrics. These varieties are continuous, like the universe. All have their origin in religious practice and ritual.

Poetry never loses its sense of sacred mystery. Poetry emerged with the chant and the dance. As Sapir puts it, “Poetry everywhere is inseparable in its origins from the singing voice and the measure of the dance” (*Language*). Written poetry is for the most part no longer part of a communal religious practice. It is the medium of individuals for individuals. I myself am mostly interested in the existential experience of *reading* poetry, in the kind of private exchange that takes place between writer and reader. I emphasize the magical effectiveness of words as words, but I’m also aware that poetry has a strong relation to music on one side and to painting on the other. It has a musical dimension, a pictorial element.

Poetry and music are sister arts. So are poetry and painting. It's as if the eye and the ear were related through poetry, as if they had become siblings, or lovers.

Harmonious Sisters, Voice, and Vers

The poem appeals to the ear. At one boundary we have the lyric as a poem dependent upon music for its full effectiveness. The word *lyric* derives from the Greek *lyra*, or “musical instrument.” The Greeks spoke of lyrics as *ta mele*, “poems to be sung.” The musical element is so intrinsic to poetry that the lyric never entirely forgets its origins in musical expression—in singing, chanting, recitation to musical accompaniment. The poet was once a performer, a bard, a scop, a troubadour. In the Renaissance the lyric was repeatedly associated with the lyre and the lute. Here is how Milton evokes the juncture of poetry and music in his poem “At a Solemn Musick”:

Blest pair of *Sirens*, pledges of Heav'ns joy,
Sphear-born, harmonious sisters, Voice, and Vers,
Wed your divine sounds, and mixt power employ

Of the nine celestial sirens assigned to the nine spheres of the universe, Milton is here specifying two—Polyhymnia, the muse of sacred song, and Erato, the muse of lyric poetry—and calling upon them to join together. Before the eighteenth century, writers or critics seemed to make little or no apparent distinction between melodic lyrics, such as Campion's ayres (“Whoever dreams of a poem where language begins to resemble music, thinks of him,” Charles Simic writes) or the songs of Shakespeare's plays, and nonmusical written lyrics, such as Shakespeare's sonnets or Donne's love poems.

Yet it was during the Renaissance that English writers first began to write their lyrics for readers rather than composing them for musical performance. They began to shape their poems to a visual medium. The space for writing as writing, for the poem as something to be read, opened up, for a written poem, unlike an oral one, has a spatial dimension. It becomes a physical object on the page. It appeals to the inner ear, to unique experience. As the idea of the individual emerged during the Renaissance, so

did the lyric poem take on fresh elements for expressing that newfound selfhood. The lyric became an instrument of greater inwardness. Later, that dimension of inwardness would start to feel like lyric poetry itself. And some poetry would start to aspire to the pure condition of music.

Winged Type

The poem appeals to the eye. It has a shapely dimension and thus relates to the plastic arts, especially painting. The poem is something to look at as well as recite. Think, for example, of e. e. cummings's typographical experiments or of John Hollander's inventive poems of visual display in *Types of Shape* or of Marianne Moore's symmetrical stanzas that look as if they were written on a typewriter. Moore's poems are written in crystalline syllabics. It is hard to imagine them handwritten. The words look as if they were scoured and dipped in acid, broken down into particles, into constituent parts, and then reconstructed, cleansed and molded, on the page.

The desire to bring together both literary and visual impulses in a shaped poem is apparently very ancient, as Dick Higgins demonstrates in his encyclopedic history and anthology *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*. Higgins points to a bewildering variety of early sources: pattern poems in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and in most of the modern European literatures; Chinese pattern texts; Sanskrit Citrakāvya and other Indic texts. There are six surviving pattern poems from Hellenistic Greece: two shaped as altars, and one each as an egg, a syrinx, an ax, and a pair of wings. (These may have served a magical or talismanic function since they were religious expressions.) These in turn became the model for the 110 pre-1750 British pattern poems that survive. It is this tradition, for example, that stands behind George Herbert's two masterpieces from *The Temple* (1633), "The Altar" and "Easter Wings," where the lines, of varying lengths, give the poems a visual shape suggesting an altar and Easter wings respectively. The lines fit the form exactly and the emotional curve of the poem matches the articulation of the shape on the page. I adore Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, a term he coined early in the century for the kind of shaped poem he believed he had invented for modernism ("Moi aussi je suis peintre," he wrote), but in truth he was developing the latest avant-garde manifestation of what in Latin poetry was called *carmen figuratum* (figured poems).

Here is Apollinaire's poem "Il Pleut," first in the original and then in Roger Shattuck's linear translation:

Il Pleut

Il pleut des voix de femmes
comme si elles étaient mortes
même dans le souvenir
et ces nuages cabrés se
merveilleuses rencontres
de ma vie o gouttelettes
écoute s'il pleut tandis
prennent à hennir tout un
univers de villes auriculaires
écoute tomber les liens
que le regret et le dédain
pleurent une ancienne
musique
qui te retiennent en haut et en bas

It's Raining

It's raining women's voices as if they had died even in memory
And it's raining you as well marvellous encounters of my life O
 little drops
Those rearing clouds begin to neigh a whole universe of
 auricular cities
Listen if it rains while regret and disdain weep to an ancient
 music
Listen to the bonds fall off which hold you above and below

The slanting lines of Apollinaire's poem create the sensation of rain running downward across a windowpane. Graphic form and verbal music come together as each long vertical line becomes a rhythmic unit of meaning. The sound of the unpunctuated lines in French creates an incantatory murmuring that evokes the sadness and melancholy of a rainy day in Paris. And yet, as Anne Hyde Greet and S. I. Lockerie point out in their acute commentary on *Calligrammes*, there is a rich ambiguity of feeling in this poem that goes beyond a simple Verlainean melancholy. Whereas the first line associates the rain with a vanished happiness, the second and third lines associate it with the wide encounters—the opening outward—of the modern world. “Trickling raindrops may be expressive of sadness,” they write, “but in the way they spread down and over the windowpane there is also a sense of adventure and exploration of space.” Apollinaire thus concretizes in the light undulating lines the sense of an old life that is sadly passing even as a fresh world is opening up.

What especially compels me about the pictorial lyric, the lyrical emblem, is how the poem displays itself as a metaphor. It says, *I am something else*. The viewer interacts with the shape; the reader experiences the precise relationship between the subject and the object, the content and the form. The writer puts the rain down on the page, the reader lets it fall.

Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking

The poem would address an unseen listener, an unseen audience. It does so through the rhetoric of address since the message in the bottle seems to be speaking to the poet alone, or to a muse, a friend, a lover, an abstraction, an object in nature . . . It seems to be speaking to God or to no

one. Rhetoric comes into play here, the radical of presentation, the rhythm of words creating a deep sensation in the reader. Rhythm would lift the poem off the page, it would bewitch the sounds of language, hypnotize the words into memorable phrases. Rhythm creates a pattern of yearning and expectation, of recurrence and difference. It is related to the pulse, the heartbeat, the way we breathe. It takes us into ourselves; it takes us out of ourselves. It differentiates us; it unites us to the cosmos.

Rhythm is a form cut into time, as Ezra Pound said in *ABC of Reading*. It is the combination in English of stressed and unstressed syllables that creates a feeling of fixity and flux, of surprise and inevitability. Rhythm is all about recurrence and change. It is poetry's way of charging the depths, hitting the fathomless. It is oceanic. I would say with Robert Graves that there is a rhythm of emotions that conditions the musical rhythms, that mental bracing and relaxing which comes to us through our sensuous impressions. It is the emotion—the very rhythm of the emotion—that determines the texture of the sounds.

I like to feel the sea drift, the liturgical cadence of the first stanza of Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." It is one sentence and twenty-two lines long. It always carries me away.

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,
Out of the Ninth-month midnight,
Over the sterile sands the fields beyond, where the child
 leaving his bed wander'd alone, bareheaded, barefoot,
Down from the shower'd halo,
Up from the mystic play of shadows twining and twisting as if
 they were alive,
Out from the patches of briars and blackberries,
From the memories of the bird that chanted to me,
From your memories sad brother, from the fitful risings and
 fallings I heard,
From under that yellow half-moon late-risen and swollen as if
 with tears,
From those beginning notes of yearning and love there in the
 mist,
From the thousand responses of my heart never to cease,

From the myriad thence-arous'd words,
From the word stronger and more delicious than any,
From such as now they start the scene revisiting,
As a flock, twittering, rising, or overhead passing,
Borne hither, ere all eludes me, hurriedly,
A man, yet by these tears a little boy again,
Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,
I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
A reminiscence sing.

The incantatory power of this is tremendous as the repetitions loosen the intellect for reverie. It seems to me that Whitman creates here the very rhythm of a singular reminiscence emerging out of the depths of mind, out of the sea waves and the rocking cradle, out of all the undifferentiated sensations of infancy, out of the myriad memories of childhood, out of all possible experiences the formative event of a boy leaving the safety of his bed and walking the seashore alone, moving "Out," "Over," "Down," "Up," "From," exchanging the safety of the indoors for the peril of the outdoors, facing his own vague yearnings and the misty void, mixing his own tears and the salt spray of the ocean, listening to the birds, understanding the language—the calling—of one bird. He walks the shore on the edge of the world, the edge of the unknown. He has entered the space that Emerson calls "*I and the Abyss*," the space of the American sublime.

In this region: out of all potential words, these words alone; out of all potential memories, this memory alone. It is the emerging rhythm itself that creates the Proustian sensation of being in two places at once, "A man, yet by these tears a little boy again, / Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves." Whitman creates through the rhetorical rhythm of these lines the very urgency of fundamental memory triggered and issuing forth. He splits himself off and moves seamlessly between the third person and the first person. And as the bird chanted to him ("From the memories of the bird that chanted to me") so he chants to us ("I, chanter of pains and joys"). This is a poem of poetic vocation.

It is telling that Whitman builds to the self-command, "A reminiscence sing." He memorializes the memory in song. There is an element

of lullaby in this poem, the lulling motion of the waves, the consoling sound of the sea. But this is a lullaby that wounds (as García Lorca said about Spanish lullabies), a lullaby of sadness that permeates the very universe itself, a lullaby that moves from chanting to singing. Paul Valéry calls the passage from prose to verse, from speech to song, from walking to dancing, “a moment that is at once action and dream.” Whitman creates such a moment here. He would spin an enchantment beyond pain and joy, he would become the poetic shaman who authors that reminiscence *for us*, who magically summons up the experience *in us*.

The Wave Always Returns

Renewal is the “pivot of lyricism,” as the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva says, comparing the lyrical element to the waves of the sea. “The wave always returns, and always returns as a different wave,” she writes in her essay “Poets with History and Poets without History”:

The same water—a different wave.

What matters is that it is a *wave*.

What matters is that the wave *will return*.

What matters is that it will *always* return *different*.

What matters most of all: however different the returning wave,
it will always return as a wave of the *sea*.

What is a wave? Composition and muscle. The same goes for
lyric poetry.

The poem is a muscular and composed thing. It moves like a wave and dissolves literalizations. We participate in its flow; we flow in its participation. We give ourselves up to its rhythm, to the process of individuation, the process of merging. When Tsvetaeva compares the lyrical element to the waves of the sea, I think of “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” I think of Wallace Stevens’s seashore lyric “The Idea of Order at Key West,” which leads to Elizabeth Bishop’s “The End of March,” Mark Strand’s “The Idea,” and Allen Grossman’s “The Woman on the Bridge over the Chicago River.” I think of Heraclitus’s idea, expanded upon by Jung, that “It is delight . . . to souls to become wet.” James Hillman explains in *The Dream and the Underworld* that “Water is the special

element of reverie, the element of reflective images and their ceaseless, ungraspable flow. Moistening in dreams refers to the soul's delight in death, its delight in sinking away from fixations in literalized concerns."

The poem moves from the eye to the ear, to the inner ear, the inner eye. It drenches us in the particulars of our senses, it moves us through the articulations of touch, taste, and scent. It actualizes our senses until we start to feel an animal alertness opening up within us. It guides our reflections. It actualizes an intuition flowing deeper than intellect. ("Beneath my incredulity / All at once is flowing / Joy . . . Intuition weightless and ongoing/ Like stanzas in a book / Or golden scales in the melodic brook."—James Merrill, *Scripts for the Pageant*.) We use our senses in poetry, but it is a mistake to try to use our senses everywhere. The poem plunges us from the visible to the invisible, it plunges us into the domain of psyche, of soul. It takes us into the realm of the demonic. Goethe notes:

In poetry, especially in that which is unconscious, before which reason and understanding fall short, and which, therefore, produces effects so far surpassing all conception, there is always something of the Demoniacal.

(Tuesday, March 8, 1831)

We discover in poetry that we are participating in something which cannot be explained or apprehended by reason or understanding alone. We participate in the imaginary. We create a space for fantasy, we enter our dream life, dream time. We deepen our breathing, our mindfulness to being, our spiritual alertness.

Poetry is an animating force. It comes alive when the poet magically inscribes a wave and thereby creates a new thing, when the text immobilizes it, when the individual poem becomes part of the great sea, when the bottle washes ashore and the wanderer happens upon it, when the reader experiences its inexhaustible depths . . .

Help Me, O Heavenly Muse

Robert Graves writes in *On English Poetry*, "Henceforward, in using the word *Poetry* I mean both the controlled and uncontrollable parts of the

art taken together, because each is helpless without the other.” No one entirely understands the relationship in poetry between trance and craft, between conscious and unconscious elements, and, indeed, poets have been obsessed by the problem of what can and cannot be controlled in the making of art. This is especially instructive to readers who bring their own conscious purposes to poetry, their own unconscious mechanisms of displacement and identification, of sublimation, projection, condensation . . .

Sometimes the emphasis is put on conscious reason, on the conscious aspects of making. Paul Valéry spoke of “une ligne donné”—“the given line”—and suggested that everything else was labor, a matter of making. Baudelaire talked of “the labor by which a reverie becomes a work of art.” In his 1846 essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” Edgar Allan Poe emphasized the conscious method of trial and error:

Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought—at the true purposes seized only at the last moment—at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view—at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable—at the cautious selections and rejections—at the painful erasures and interpolations—in a word, at the wheels and pinions—the tackle for scene-shifting—the step-ladders and demon-traps—the cock’s leathers, the red paint and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrion*.

Here Poe is giving enormous preference—and theatrical privilege—to the nature of reason in the creative process.

But there is something else. It may be true that the poet is given only a single line but that line is nonetheless a gift from the unconscious, a hunch, an intuition, and a perception. The poet is one who often thinks by feeling. Remember the famous Cartesian cogito (“I think, therefore I am”) and Paul Valéry’s useful variation on Descartes, “Sometimes I think; and sometimes I *am*” (*Analects*). Inspiration is in-breathing, indwelling,

and poetry can never be entirely willed—as Plato knew. It is often connected to passion, to mania, to childlike play, to the unconscious itself. Poets have always known they are trying to invoke for us something that can't be entirely controlled. This is the necessary touch of madness that Plato made so much of, the freedom that terrified him. Here is Socrates in the dialogue *Phaedrus*:

There is a third form of possession or madness, of which the Muses are the source. This seizes a tender, virgin soul and stimulates it to rapt passionate expression, especially in lyric poetry, glorifying the countless mighty deeds of ancient times for the instruction of posterity. But if any man comes to the gates of poetry without the madness of the Muses, persuaded that skill alone will make him a good poet, then shall he and his works of sanity with him be brought to nought by the poetry of madness, and behold, their place is nowhere to be found.

In this view poetry is dangerous. It is allied closely to madness and is not entirely at the dispensation of the poet's conscious will or intellect. "Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will," Shelley writes in his romantic defense of poetry:

A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness.

Whoever calls out "Help me, O Heavenly Muse," advertises a dependence on a force beyond the intellect. In general, the fierce power that sometimes comes through the work of the great poets of reason, from Samuel Johnson to Louise Bogan and J. V. Cunningham, comes from the deep undertow of the demoniacal that is fended off by the conscious activity of making. Visionary poets welcome the wind of madness—I think of Rimbaud and Shelley, of Hart Crane and Federico García Lorca—but part of their power comes from the fact that the sudden illumination is what the mathematician Henri Poincaré calls "a manifest

sign of long, unconscious inner work,” and that the wind is shaped to the exigencies of form. I have always liked the dictum of the baroque Jesuit poet Tommaso Ceva that poetry is “a dream dreamed in the presence of reason.”

The poet would call the muse “Laura” or “Beatrice,” the poet would name her “Mnemosyne” (personification of memory) or “Clio” (muse of history). The poet would borrow Freud’s notion of the “uncanny,” the unconscious, or Jung’s collective unconscious, or Jacques Maritain’s idea of creative intuition. The older poet advises the younger poet: mystery abides. So W. S. Merwin, for example, remembers his teacher John Berryman giving him advice in the years just after the Second World War:

he suggested I pray to the Muse
get down on my knees and pray
right there in the corner and he
said he meant it literally
(“Berryman”)

Berryman also said that

the great presence
that permitted everything and transmuted it
in poetry was passion
passion was genius and he praised movement and invention
(“Berryman”)

A transfiguring passion. A force beyond the confines of the conscious self.

There is no true poetry without conscious craft, absorbed attention, absolute concentration. There is no true poetry without unconscious invention. The reader, too, enters into the relationship between the controlled and the uncontrollable aspects of the art. Shelley says that “Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man.” The poem is a genie that comes out of the bottle to liberate the reader’s imagination, the divinity within. The writer and the reader make meaning together. The poet who calls on help from the heavenly muse also does so on behalf of the imaginative reader.

*It Is Something of an Accident That You
Are the Reader and I the Writer*

Lyric poetry is a form of verbal materialism, an art of language, but it is much more than “the best words in the best order.” It is language fulfilling itself, language compressed and raised to its highest power. Language in action against time, against death. There are times when I am awestruck by the way that poems incarnate the spirit—the spirits—and strike the bedrock of being. Other times I am struck by how little the poem has to go on, how inadequate its means. For what does the writer have but some black markings on a blank page to imagine a world? Hence these lines from the splendid Florentine poet Guido Cavalcanti:

Noi siàn le triste penne isbigottite
le cesoiuzze e’l coltellin dolente.

We are the poor, bewildered quills,
The little scissors and the grieving penknife.

Cavalcanti projects his own grievous feelings of imaginative inadequacy onto the writer’s very tools (quills and the knives to sharpen them), the writer’s diminutive instruments.

In *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Italo Calvino makes an insightful comment that enlarges on Cavalcanti’s lines, creating a statement about the experience of literature itself:

all “realities” and “fantasies” can take on form only by means of writing, in which outwardness and innerness, the world and I, experience and fantasy, appear composed of the same verbal material. The polymorphic visions of the eyes and the spirit are contained in uniform lines of small or capital letters, periods, commas, parentheses—pages of signs, packed as closely together as grains of sand, representing the many-sided spectacle of the world as a surface that is always the same and always different, like dunes shifted by the desert wind.

I am reminded by Calvino’s description of the literal limits of art: that all the incitement and grace of literature has to take place in the lineup of written characters on the page.

“There is then creative reading as well as creative writing,” Emerson says in “The American Scholar” in a statement that could be a credo for the reader of poems. Poetry alerts us to what is deepest in ourselves—it arouses a spiritual desire which it also gratifies. It attains what it avows. But it can only do so with the reader’s imaginative collaboration and even complicity. The writer creates through words a felt world which only the reader can vivify and internalize. Writing is embodiment. Reading is contact. In the preface to *Obra poetica*, Jorge Luis Borges writes:

The taste of the apple (states Berkeley) lies in the contact of the fruit with the palate, not in the fruit itself; in a similar way (I would say) poetry lies in the meeting of the poem and reader, not in the lines of symbols printed on the pages of a book. What is essential is the aesthetic act, the thrill, the almost physical emotion that comes with each reading.

Borges continues on to suggest that poetry can work its magic by fulfilling our profound need to “recover a past or prefigure a future.”

Poetry depends on the mutuality of writer and reader. The symbols on the page alone are insufficient. Borges was a fabulist and in the foreword to his first book of poems he went even further to suggest that poetry goes beyond mutuality, beyond identification, into identity itself:

If in the following pages there is some successful verse or other, may the reader forgive me the audacity of having written it before him. We are all one; our inconsequential minds are much alike, and circumstances so influence us that it is something of an accident that you are the reader and I the writer—the unsure, ardent writer—of my verses.

This is funny and brilliant and perhaps disingenuous, but there is also a truth in it which has to do with a common sensation of reading: the eerie feeling that we are composing what we are responding to. In *The Redress of Poetry* Seamus Heaney calls this “the fluid, exhilarating moment which lies at the heart of any memorable reading, the undisappointed joy of finding that everything holds up and answers the desire that it awakens.” Poetry creates its own autonomous world, and what that world asks from us it also answers within us.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard says that “Poetry puts language in a state of emergence.” It emerges at short range. Bachelard also quotes Pierre-Jean Jouve’s statement that “Poetry is a soul inaugurating a form.” The notion of the soul’s inauguration of form suggests what Bachelard calls “supreme power” and “human dignity.” I honor that dignity by recognizing the form it takes, the way it composes itself. Every work of art needs a respondent to complete it. It is only partially realized without that imaginative response. Jean-Paul Sartre puts the matter emphatically in *What Is Literature?*:

The creative act is only an incomplete and abstract moment in the production of a work. If the author existed alone he would be able to write as much as he liked; the work as *object* would never see the light of day and he would either have to put down his pen or despair. But the operation of writing implies that of reading as its dialectical correlative and these two connected acts necessitate two distinct agents. It is the joint effort of author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. There is no art except for and by others.

The reader exists on the horizon of the poem. The message in the bottle may seem to be speaking to the poet alone, or to God, or to nobody, but the reader is the one who finds and overhears it, who unseals the bottle and lets the language emerge. The reader becomes the listener, letting the poem voice and rediscover itself as it is read.

The Shock, the Swoon, the Bliss

I take the poet as a maker who sends out a formal enticement, a provocation, a challenge. I encounter—I am encountered by—a work of art. For me, that encounter is active, inquisitive, relentless, disturbing, exuberant, daring, and beholden. Poets speak of the shock, the swoon, and the bliss of writing, but why not also speak of the shock, the swoon, and the bliss of reading?

2



A Made Thing

I have carried the message in the bottle home, but now I must decipher it as a linguistic event, as a rhythmic group of words packed in salt, as a last will and testament. What is it saying? Poetry is a soul-making activity, and the reader in part authors that activity by responding to the form of the poem, its way of shaping itself. I have the idea that a certain kind of exemplary poem teaches you how to read it. It carries its own encoded instructions, enacting its subject, pointing to its own operation. It enacts what it is about—a made thing that indicates the nature of its own making. Poems communicate before they are understood and the structure operates on, or inside, the reader even as the words infiltrate the consciousness. The form is the shape of the poem's understanding, its way of being in the world, and it is the form that structures our experience.

Poiēsis means “making” and, as the ancient Greeks recognized, the poet is first and foremost a maker. The Greeks saw no contradiction (and I don't think we should, either) between the truth that poetry is somehow or other inspired and, simultaneously, an art (*technē*), a craft requiring a blend of talent, training, and long practice. Open the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* to the entry for “Poesie” and you discover that in the Renaissance the word *makers*, as in “courtly makers,” was an exact equivalent for *poets*. The word *poem* became English in the

sixteenth century and it has been with us ever since to designate a form of fabrication, a type of composition, a made thing.

I would also keep in mind the magical potency of the made thing. What Picasso said about painting being more than an aesthetic operation is equally true of poetry. He declared that art is “a form of magic designed as a mediator between this strange, hostile world and us, a way of seizing the power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires.”

Here are three poems—three messages—that have lodged in me as a reader, and that I, in turn, have found instructive and emblematic. They give form to our terrors and desires. And they have taught me how to interpret what I have encountered. They combine deep lyric feeling with an equally powerful organizing structure. The apologist for surrealism, André Breton, described poetry as “a room of marvels.” But it is also a room with a design, a system. How does that design work? My notion is that it is possible to honor the reality of the poem by attending to its dynamic unfolding. It’s worth trying to describe how deeply felt poems go about the business of creating meaning in and for us.

Here is Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “One Art,” from her last book of poems, *Geography III*:

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;
so many things seemed filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother’s watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

“One Art” is a kind of instruction manual on loss. It’s infused with that wry tonal irony so characteristic of Bishop’s late poetry. The blank verse is pitched at the level of speech (“Lose something every day”) and the language is natural sounding and deceptively informal, given the formal requirements of the lyric. The poem is a villanelle—that defiant French contraption with its roots in Italian folk song, which came into American poetry late in the nineteenth century. Like all villanelles, it has nineteen lines divided into six stanzas—five tercets and one quatrain—turning on two rhymes and built around two refrains. The first and third lines rhyme throughout, as do the middle lines of each stanza. (The word *stanza* means “room” in Italian, and the center rhymes help connect the rooms of this lyric dwelling.) The first and third lines become the refrain of alternate stanzas and the final two lines of the poem. As it turns and returns, Bishop’s verse becomes a model of stability and change, repetition and variation. The first line—“The art of losing isn’t hard to master”—repeats almost exactly throughout the poem, whereas the second refrain never repeats in its initial form and modulates entirely around the word “disaster.” So, too, the poem combines feminine or multisyllabic rhymes (such as “master” and “disaster”) with masculine or one-syllable rhymes (such as “spent” and “meant”), deftly varying its full or exact rhymes with Dickinsonian half-rhymes (such as “fluster” and “master”). It also characteristically runs an enjambed line into an end-stopped one (as in the fourth stanza: “And look! my last, or / next-to-last, of three loved houses went”), thus creating a sense of qualification, of hesitating forward movement and momentary rest. The momentum is chastened or balanced by circularity, the circularity ruptured by a progressive movement forward. This model of formal ingenuity deserves to stand with

such other exemplary modern villanelles as William Empson's "Villanelle" ("It is the pain, it is the pain, endures") and "Missing Dates"; W. H. Auden's "If I Could Tell You"; Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night"; Theodore Roethke's "The Waking"; Weldon Kees's "Five Villanelles," especially the one beginning "The crack is moving down the wall"; and Donald Justice's "In Memory of the Unknown Poet, Robert Boardman Vaughn."

In the Vassar College library there are seventeen extant drafts of "One Art" written over a six-month period, and they reveal just how hard Bishop had to work to match and master an uncontrollable grief by structuring it into the almost mathematical equation of a villanelle. The poet Ellen Bryant Voigt, who has written well about the formal development of the different drafts, suggests that the process is summed up in the lines from Yeats's poem "Adam's Curse":

A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

The making of Bishop's villanelle entailed a lifetime of deliberation, hours of stitching and unstitching, a long apprenticeship to the art of poetry, and an even longer apprenticeship to the art of loss, and yet the final product reads as if it had come together effortlessly in a moment's thought.

What especially intrigues me about "One Art" is how scrupulously Bishop has built a second structure into the villanelle form. She has re-configured it so that the form itself becomes causal to the meaning. She starts small and continually enlarges the losses, beginning with inconsequential things—the door keys, the wasted hour—and moving up from there. The third stanza provides the essential clue as to how we are meant to read this poem. "Then practice losing farther, losing faster," she writes, signifying that the losses are going to progress, going farther, coming more quickly. It is worse to give up "places, and names, and where it was you meant / to travel" than to misplace keys or misspend an hour, though, as she hastens to add, it's still not a catastrophe. She then enlarges the terms by moving to the first poignant loss in the poem, the first thing that truly matters: "I lost my mother's watch." Now we are

getting closer to home. “And look!” she exclaims, focusing the reader into an intimate listener, a confidant: “my last, or / next-to-last, of three loved houses went.” It’s characteristic of Bishop to diffuse the more melodramatic statement—“my last of three loved houses went”—by qualifying it for accuracy. The ethic of this poet is never to overstate the nature of the feeling, to be as precise as possible about the impact of loss. In the next stanza she enlarges that loss yet again, moving from the penultimate house to two beautiful cities and, even larger than that, some Shakespearean “realms,” including a couple of splendid rivers and an entire continent where she once lived. We have completed an arc that moves from losing door keys to relinquishing a continent. And now for the first time in the poem, in the fifteenth line and the penultimate stanza, she acknowledges losing something she actually misses. “I miss them,” she admits, immediately adding, “but it wasn’t a disaster.” Randall Jarrell once said about John Crowe Ransom:

Most writers become over-rhetorical when they are insisting on more emotion than they actually feel or need to feel; Ransom is just the opposite. He is perpetually insisting, by his detached, mock-pedantic, wittily complicated tone, that he is not feeling much at all, not half so much as he really should be feeling.

(“John Ransom’s Poetry”)

And so it is with Elizabeth Bishop. And here we can see that the two refrain lines are working in tandem and counterpoint. Even as the speaker must acknowledge that the losses are cutting deeper and deeper, she also keeps insisting that they aren’t disastrous. In this way the poet of understatement wittily resists the feeling of encroaching catastrophe. To modify something that Ezra Pound once said about a villanelle by Ernest Dowson, it seems to me that the losses are the emotional truth in this poem, which the intellect, through its various gyrations, struggles in vain to escape.

This brings us to the final stanza where, in an extraordinary turn, the lyric becomes a love poem. By the structural logic of the poem, the movement from the miniature to the gigantic, the loss of the beloved must necessarily be the greatest loss of all. “Even losing you,” she says, momentarily turning and addressing her lover directly, then just as quickly pulling back, adding parenthetically “the joking voice, a gesture /

I love,” thereby summoning and representing the beloved by two metonymic terms, “I shan’t have lied.”

It’s evident
the art of losing’s not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

The conclusion of the poem is the first acknowledgment, after everything that has come before, that this final loss actually feels disastrous. As the losses have accumulated throughout the poem, the defense mechanisms—the intellectual resistances—have stayed in place until in the end this poet of terrific understatement finally breaks down and admits that this signal loss feels catastrophic to her. William Maxwell once said that a writer gets two exclamation points in a lifetime, and Bishop has brilliantly used her quota here. At the point that she commands herself to “*Write it!*” one becomes aware that the activity of writing mirrors the psychological process of recognition. The repetition of the word *like* compounds the effect. By forcing herself to write it down she is forcing herself to admit and face it. Far from the villanelle being a form in which everything is already figured out and established, a container into which one pours previously worked-out thoughts and feelings, the form itself becomes a way for the writer to test and unearth those feelings in language. The process of recognition becomes the emotional discovery of this poem, the greater part of writing as well as reading it. The reader overhears what the poet is forcing herself to acknowledge. Thus the lyric psychologically enacts the experience of coming to terms with a universe of loss.

“Surely there is an element of mortal panic and fear underlying all works of art?” Elizabeth Bishop asked in her essay on Marianne Moore. “One Art” is a poem that summons such feelings even as it resists, contains, and tries not to succumb to them. That makes it all the more moving when the resistance finally caves in at the end.

Here is another poem of mortal panic and fear, Pablo Neruda’s “Solo la muerte” (“Nothing but Death”), a lyric of radical overstatement from *Residencia en la tierra* (*Residence on Earth*) that desperately flings itself at human loss. Instead of trying to fend off the feeling, as Bishop does, Neruda invokes and summons it at every point.

There are cemeteries that are lonely,
graves full of bones that do not make a sound,
the heart moving through a tunnel,
in it darkness, darkness, darkness,
like a shipwreck we die going into ourselves,
as though we were drowning inside our hearts,
as though we lived falling out of the skin into the soul.

And there are corpses,
feet made of cold and sticky clay,
death is inside the bones,
like a barking where there are no dogs,
coming out from bells somewhere, from graves somewhere,
growing in the damp air like tears or rain.

Sometimes I see alone
coffins under sail,
embarking with the pale dead, with women that have dead hair,
with bakers who are as white as angels,
and pensive young girls married to notary publics,
caskets sailing up the vertical river of the dead,
the river of dark purple,
moving upstream with sails filled out by the sound of death,
filled by the sound of death which is silence.

Death arrives among all that sound
like a shoe with no foot in it, like a suit with no man in it,
comes and knocks, using a ring with no stone in it, with no
finger in it,
comes and shouts with no mouth, with no tongue, with no
throat.

Nevertheless its steps can be heard
and its clothing makes a hushed sound, like a tree.

I'm not sure, I understand only a little, I can hardly see,
but it seems to me that its singing has the color of damp violets,
of violets that are at home in the earth,
because the face of death is green,

and the look death gives is green,
with the penetrating dampness of a violet leaf
and the somber color of embittered winter.

But death also goes through the world dressed as a broom,
lapping the floor, looking for dead bodies,
death is inside the broom,
the broom is the tongue of death looking for corpses,
it is the needle of death looking for thread.

Death is inside the folding cots:
it spends its life sleeping on the slow mattresses,
in the black blankets, and suddenly breathes out:
it blows out a mournful sound that swells the sheets,
and the beds go sailing toward a port
where death is waiting, dressed like an admiral.

(translated by Robert Bly)

It seems to me that Neruda's poem has what García Lorca called "duende." The *duende* was traditionally an Andalusian trickster figure, much like the Yiddish dybbuk, but Lorca used it as a name for creative possession, for inspiration in the presence of death, for that scorched spirit that sometimes takes over in moments of artistic creation. It is an irrational power, something like a demonic religious enthusiasm. "All that has black sounds has duende," Lorca says in "Play and Theory of the Duende," and Neruda's poem is filled with such black sounds. It is a magnet for them. This lucid dream has a wild surreal associativeness, but it also has a relentless logic of its own. The spiritual problem is death—only death, a death that is everywhere. The technical problem, which is an index to the spiritual one, is how to write about it; that is, how to dramatize a ubiquitous presence, an omnivorous Something, which manifests itself as an absence, as Nothingness. The poet of Whitmanesque ambitions must find a way to present something that has as its sole purpose taking things away. Consequently, in "Nothing but Death" Neruda was forced, or forced himself, to invent an imaginative structure and develop an imagistic strategy for dramatizing and incarnating what he sees as the quintessence of death itself.

When the full-blooded Native American appears in the next poem, "I Am a Sioux Brave," he is described as "just plain drunk" and knows "no more than I do." The stranger can offer no native wisdom since he appears only as Wright's estranged and drunken double. But there had been a small sea change in Wright's work by the time of "Hook," which appears in *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* (1977). Does "Hook" dramatize the same encounter? If so, its tenor is completely different. The Sioux in Wright's later poem seems cold sober and knows more than the protagonist. Instead of a con, he comes with a gift, a coin, and "Hook" becomes a poem about unexpected kindness, about contact between strangers.

How powerful it becomes then in the title poem of *To a Blossoming Pear Tree*, the poem following "Hook," when the speaker refuses sex with an "ashamed" and "hopeless" old man who comes from nowhere out of the "unendurable snow" to stroke his face.

Give it to me, he begged.
I'll pay you anything.

I flinched. Both terrified,
We slunk away,
Each in his own way dodging
The cruel darts of the cold.

This is just the old man Wright was terrified of himself becoming in "In Terror of Hospital Bills." The shame and vulnerability of the old man "So near death / He was willing to take / Any love he could get" fills him with recognizable pain (a pain he identifies as "something human") and turns him longingly to the "pure delicate body" of a blossoming pear tree. What goes too far, what he cannot accept, in "To a Blossoming Pear Tree" goes just far enough in "Hook"—an engagement mixed with restraint (and restraint overcome)—and makes what he actually *takes* all the more extraordinary.

In many of Wright's best poems the speaker, a criminal outcast, escapes from the social realm of other people into the more consoling realm of nature. Think of the aboriginal encounter with the two Indian ponies in "A Blessing." Its final recognition is a late Wordsworthian epiphany: