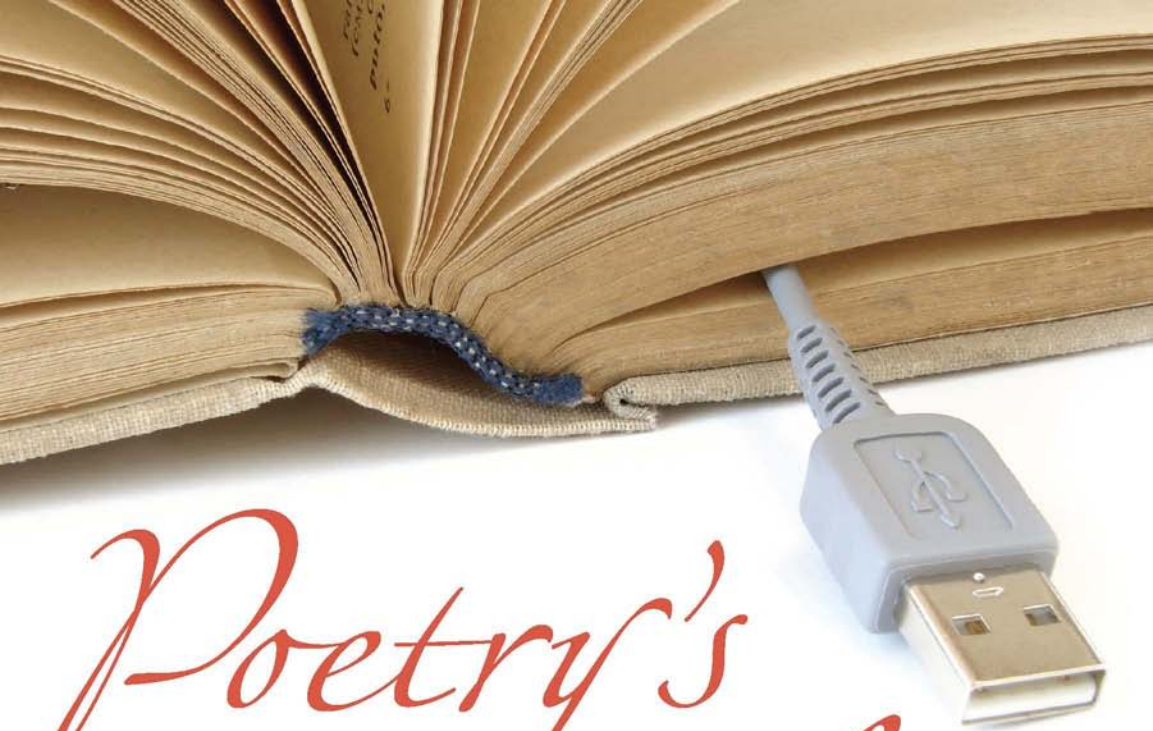

Poetry's Afterlife

Verse in the Digital Age

Kevin Stein

POETRY'S AFTERLIFE

DIGITALCULTUREBOOKS is an imprint of the University of Michigan Press and the Scholarly Publishing Office of the University of Michigan Library dedicated to publishing innovative and accessible work exploring new media and their impact on society, culture, and scholarly communication.

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For Deb, with daisies,
And for Kirsten and Joseph, who question everything.

A modest flower,
resembling a pink sweet-pea,
you cannot help

but admire it
until its habits
become known.

Are we not most of us
like that?

—WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS,
"The Pink Locust"

Preface

Poetry today enjoys a spirited afterlife. Its aesthetic hereafter has come despite, or perhaps because of, two decades of commentary diagnosing American poetry as gravely moribund if not already deceased.[1] A little over twenty years ago Joseph Epstein's provocative "Who Killed Poetry?" ignited torch-waving debate between opposing camps of the tweed sport coat and the black beret. Three years later Dana Gioia's "Can Poetry Matter?" and Jonathan Holden's sensible *The Fate of American Poetry* arrived on the scene, both proposing cures for what allegedly ailed our poetry. Even Donald Hall's impassioned defense of the art invoked funereal lingo, exasperatedly calling for "Death to the Death of Poetry."

As a writer, I've literally grown up with the notion that poetry was knocking on death's door—or was it, à la Bob Dylan, knock, knock, knocking on heaven's door? And all my teachers and most literary journals saw fit to remind me that I, as practitioner of said art, was bloodying my knuckles. Practicing a dead art was regarded as a literary badge of honorable dishonor. That poetry was unmarketable and maligned made it paradoxically the purest of art forms. Our small poetry circle, and the university culture into which it had retreated, elevated this isolation as redemptive not destructive of the art.

My sense of poetry's near-certain passing was challenged in unexpected ways following my appointment as Illinois poet laureate in 2003. In short, I found myself sweetly flummoxed by the widespread public interest in poetry I encountered around the state. What fascinated me was the disparity between the profession's notion of poetry's mortality and the spirited reception poetry enjoyed when I presented well over one hundred readings in factories, nursing homes, churches, urban parks, and rural public libraries. Each foray I made into alternative means of promoting poetry was met with energetic approval. Goodly numbers of students, teachers, and the general public, for instance, visited Web sites I'd created to feature audio and video

poetry, and those same citizens welcomed an audio CD anthology featuring our state's poets reading from their works. Over time, it occurred to me that literary reading among the public was actually experiencing, as the recent National Endowment for the Arts research report "Reading on the Rise" suggests, a surprising revivification. It struck me then that poetic art had not given up its literary ghost. For a fated art supposedly pushing up aesthetic daisies, poetry these days is up and about in the streets, schools, universities, clubs, and online. Largely overlooked by national media, poetry flourishes among the people in a lively if curious underground existence. It's this second life, or better, poetry's afterlife, that interests me.

Poetry's Afterlife thus focuses on three issues intersecting poetry and the increasingly digital culture that receives it. This book surveys the current poetry scene, traces how we arrived here, and suggests where we're going. First, it considers the means by which a poet defines and necessarily redefines the individual poetic self amid the pendulum swings of large-scale aesthetic history. Next, this book examines the manner in which technological advances have changed how poetry is written, distributed, and received in American culture, focusing especially on poetry's changing relationship with both traditional print-centered and experimental computer-based modes. Finally, it scrutinizes poets' increasingly institutionalized roles as creative writing teachers and as public proselytizers of the art, assessing the classroom as the febrile site where students—our future poets—come to welcome or to reject the art. In short, *Poetry's Afterlife* considers the intersection of poets' private art across the culture's communal interchange.

These essays are meant to be more investigative and propositional than doctrinaire. In form they are hybrids, blending the scholarly and the theoretical with the meandering pleasures of memoir. They are in turns aesthetic as well as social, theoretical as well as practical, and personal as well as communal.

The book's initial section, On Poets & Aesthetic History, maps the curious (often thorny) path by which American poetry arrived at its present aesthetic moment. "Paper or Plastic, Pepsi or Coke, Irony or Sincerity?" traces the virtues as well as the trials of American poetry's enduring tug of war between rival aesthetic poles. Extending this notion, "'The Only Courage Is Joy!': Ecstasy and Doubt in James Wright's Poetry" then examines one poet's career-long negotiation with a peculiar expression of these very dialectical extremes and exposes Wright's private wrestling with large-scale aesthetic history. "Playing Favorites: American Poetry's Top Ten–ism Fetish" reflects

generally on the rousing if bookish process by which poets forge personal relationships to literary history and muses particularly on poets' current fascination with ranking their favorite books. Next, as its James Whitcomb Riley–inspired title suggests, "'When the Frost Is on the Punkin': Newspaper Poetry's History and Decline" investigates the heyday of American newspaper verse and its twentieth-century waning. Our nation's renewed flirtation with the newspaper as medium for public verse is the subject of "Aesthetic Dodo," particularly recent attempts to reintroduce this nearly extinct mode into the dwindling wilds of the country's daily rags.

The book's next division, On Technology & the Writerly Life, considers poetic art's evolving practices in an era rife with competing traditional and innovative technologies. This section opens with "Poems and Pixels: The Work of Art in an Age of Digital Reproduction," revisiting Walter Benjamin's landmark essay in light of recent innovations in digital creation and distribution of art in our Internet and YouTube era. Next, "A Digital Poetry *Play*list: Varieties of Video and New Media Poetries" offers what is arguably the first-ever print-based poet's appraisal of digital poetry and theory. This essay explores electronic poetries that transport poems off the confines of the printed page and into the virtual world of the computer screen, also presenting an initial integrated discussion of video poetry and new media poetries. "These Drafts and Castoffs: Mapping Literary Manuscripts" then ponders paper-based poetry manuscripts' revelations about the poet's writerly process, the bewildering swirl of personal and communal aesthetic pressures. The section's final essay, "Death by Zeroes and Ones: The Fate of Literary 'Papers,'" examines implications for hard-copy manuscript materials, given changes wrought by computer-based methods of composing, revising, and archiving poetry.

On Teaching & the Writer's Workshop shifts the book's spotlight to the classroom where students directly engage poetry—in essence, the venue in which poetry's future resides. "The Hammer" addresses the poetry workshop scene, focusing on the volatile pedagogical and emotional landscape found there. "Voice: What You Say and How Readers Hear It" speaks directly to young writers seeking a workable understanding of the ever-elusive notion of poetic voice. "Why Kids Hate Poetry" then assesses how schools' current pedagogical approaches to teaching poetry tend to deaden rather than to entice students to the poetic arts. This section's concluding essay, "Whitman's Sampler: An Assortment of Youth Poems," amounts to just that—an ample sampling and consideration of poems written by American youth.

The volume's concluding section, "After Silence," likens poetry's current

afterlife to the beguiling because unanticipated music-after-silence offered by the compact disk's hidden track. The essay "(Hidden Track): Poetry in Public Places" thus considers my experiences promoting poetry as state laureate and suggests what results might reasonably be expected from such public outreach. In sum, this book responds to claims of poetry's unfortunate demise by examining poetry's afterlife—its revenant and sustaining music.

Acknowledgments

Much of the impetus for this volume of essays comes from my reading of and association with peers, poets who share what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls a generation's "historical horizon." The list numbers a dozen or so, thus looming impossibly long. Suffice it to say that my contemplation of their poems' contributions to the contemporary world opened avenues of investigation I'd not have chanced upon otherwise. Other sources of useful prodding have been Bradley University's poetry writing and literature students, whose curiosity and élan fueled my own inquiries. Thanks are due as well to numerous Illinois grade, middle, and high school students for offering the gift of their poems for my discussions.

Some essays within this manuscript have appeared previously. Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following editors and publications. "Playing Favorites: American Poetry's Top Ten–ism Fetish" appeared within the pages of Richard Burgin's *Boulevard.* "The Hammer" appeared originally in *Clackamas Literary Review*. "These Drafts and Castoffs: Mapping Literary Manuscripts" was chosen for the *Kenyon Review* by David Lynn, who also selected "Death by Zeroes and Ones: The Fate of Literary 'Papers'" for feature in the inaugural issue of the Web magazine *Kenyon Review Online.* In addition, "Voice: What You Say and How Readers Hear It" was included in Jeff Knorr and Tim Schell's *Mooring against the Tide: Writing Fiction and Poetry.* The essay "(Hidden Track): Poetry in Public Places" was published by Susan Hahn in *TriQuarterly.* Finally, David Fenza and Supriya Bhatnagar printed "'The Only Courage Is Joy!': Ecstasy and Doubt in James Wright's Poetry" in AWP's the *Writer's Chronicle.*

I am grateful for Bradley University's support, which offered time to read and reflect as well as to write and revise these essays. For the balm of her spirit and her person, I am indebted to Deb and to our children, Kirsten and Joe, for excusing (and often enlightening) my preoccupations.

Contents

SECTION ONE

On Poets & Aesthetic History

CHAPTER 1

Paper or Plastic, Pepsi or Coke, Irony or Sincerity?

That question. No, THE question. Invariably, it arises in the post-poetry-reading Q&A, its terms variable but its agenda strikingly consistent. Sandwiched between the usual queries about where I get my ideas, whether I write at night or in the morning, and what books I'd recommend, someone sheepishly asks, as if soliciting a chef's secret recipe, "What makes a good poem *good*—thinking or feeling?" Depending on the audience's sophistication, the polar terms framing the query might instead invoke intellect or emotion, rhetoric or sincerity, learning or inspiration, text or performance, even skill or mere luck. Posed with all due seriousness, the question looms like Zeus's thundercloud, the god ready to fling lightning bolts down upon the losing tribe too foolish to honor the Olympian truth, art's true god of gods. Tendered fervently and achingly for aesthetic confirmation, the question admits of no namby-pamby ambiguity. It's one or the other, pal, in the same way there's paper or plastic, Pepsi or Coke.

The question is instructive for what it says about Americans' conception of poetic art. In all its countless (dis)guises, the question devolves to something like this: to be a great poet, must one be learned and mannerly, or instead, must one be intuitive and wild? These poets and readers have tapped into American poetry's longstanding AC/DC current. To them, it's either Door 1 or Door 2, either True or False. And the poets they read and the poetry they themselves write register their ardent aesthetic claims. True enough, since the time of Emerson, American poetry has enjoyed—or suffered—a rousing dialectical conversation between opposing aesthetic camps. In *Poetic Culture* Christopher Beach describes this conversation as a series

of revolutions and counter-revolutions forged by aesthetically combative adherents: "Poetic history over the past two centuries can in fact be characterized as a struggle for poetic legitimacy carried out either by individuals or by small and elite groups of writers who engage in a succession of successful or abortive revolutions."[1] These camps have been variously labeled, as we shall see, but the characteristics that define each polar group have remained fairly constant. One faction is said to advocate, and to practice in its writings, a sophisticated, intellectual, and often ironic response to the world. The opposing faction pursues an intuitive, sometimes purposely primitive, experimental, and emotional mode of writing.

Camp A versus Camp B

A bevy of critics has exerted a great deal of energy analyzing and describing this bifurcation of American poetics that Emerson himself ruefully labeled a "schism." Just past the turn of the twentieth century, Van Wyck Brooks studied the scene and concluded American writing fell into two divergent cliques, the "Highbrow" and the "Lowbrow."[2] According to Brooks, the Highbrows mimicked the urbane and rational manners of the European upper classes. To the contrary, the Lowbrows wore their American primitivism too proudly, invoking a wildness and incivility attendant to their rebellious attitudes toward art in particular and life in general. Brooks feared the dialectic was a "deadlock" few American writers might successfully negotiate. Near the turn of the century, critic Philip Rahv identified what he believed were the fundamental "polar types" of American literature, to which he applied the now-indelicate terms "paleface" and "redskin."[3] The paleface country club boasted members such as T. S. Eliot and Henry James, writers who evidenced an intellectual, often ascetic, and refined "estrangement from reality." On the other hand, the redskins—the tribe of Whitman, Thoreau, and William Carlos Williams—shared an emotional, largely unrestrained immersion in their environment, even when "rebelling against one or another of its manifestations."[4] The paleface, thus, stands apart from the proceedings of the world, reflecting intelligently even while experiencing a flow of events and attitudes. The redskin, though, rejects such Cartesian dualism and reacts intuitively, primarily emotively. In short, the paleface *imposes* order on what he experiences; the redskin *perceives* a preexistent order with which to align himself.

Rahv viewed this polarity as a "split personality" or a "blight of onesid-

edness" in the American mind. Others noticed a similar disjuncture. Roy Harvey Pearce labeled the two groups "mythic" and "Adamic," while R. W. B. Lewis, using Emerson's terms, tagged them "the party of memory" and the "party of hope." D. H. Lawrence offered up the terms "genteel" and "Indian," while poet Robert Lowell characterized a poet's binary options as the choice to write either "cooked" or "raw" poetry.[5] In his book on Lowell, Stephen Gould Axelrod expanded Lowell's remark, suggesting that the divergent manner in which American writers react to "myths of experience" allows for a tangible division in our literature "between writers who experience primarily with the head and those who experience with the blood."[6] In the mid-1980s, Charles Altieri defined this conflict as that existing between poets following either "ideals of lucidity" or "ideals of lyricism." Sipping a cocktail blended equally of revelation and resignation, Altieri called the dialogue "the longest running play in our cultural history."[7]

In recent years, this dialectic has reasserted itself in the stark divisions between those poets labeled stodgily "academic" and those who adhere to a range of what Hank Lazer calls "oppositional poetries." While academic poets tend to publish their work in hard copy largely via established journals and presses, "opposing" poets mostly reject those means of reaching the public. As the latter moniker implies, these poets set themselves in various modes of opposition to the work of poets connected to university-supported creative writing programs. In fact, the terms "academic" and "workshop" have become interchangeable as means to describe (and to dismiss) mainstream poets said to reject Modernism's formal experimentation, to rely too easily on the straightforward lyric voice, and to decry the corrosive effects of literary theory and philosophy on American poetry.

Against the mainstream's intellectual geezers, Lazer lassoes a wide range of poets within his "oppositional" camp, including "varieties of ethnopoetics, oral and performance poetries, and feminist poetries." All these oppositional groups share, however, one intention: to "critique and contest assumptions and practices of more mainstream poetries."[8] Chief among these poetries is Language writing, its practitioners a group of poets deeply influenced by philosophical and theoretical concerns and whose work thus "takes seriously those theories of the sign and those issues of representation that mainstream poetry repudiates."[9] In volume 2 of *Opposing Poetries,* Lazer focuses on poets associated with the Language movement, writers such as Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, Lynn Hejinian, Susan Howe, and Douglas Messerli.

Another cadre of these oppositional poetries is composed of performance, slam, and spoken word poets. Beach, in fact, devotes a chapter of his *Poetic Culture* to detailing the culture of slam and spoken word poets associated with New York's Nuyorican Café. Here, the hoary historical dialectic narrows to those who favor performance over text. These poets live in the realm of oral presentation, in the flux of evolving text, and in authorial dependence on audience participation. They often shun the page altogether in favor of live performance before an audience equally committed to an expressive outcome. Slam poets such as Paul Beatty, Dana Bryant, Lisa Buscani, Marc Smith, and Maggie Estep have already developed a national reputation based on the live performance of their poems. Others such as Henry Rollins have blended poetry/music crossover formats to much success. MTV's Affiliate Promotions Department sponsored the "Free Your Mind" spoken word tour, bringing these poets to college campuses across the nation. Some, such as Reg. E. Gaines, have recorded spoken word albums in an effort to reach audiences devoted to audio and disabused of the book.[10] It is instructive to remember that in ancient Rome one went about "publishing" one's poetry by reading it aloud before an assembled group. One could argue these contemporary spoken word poets have thus breathed fresh life into an ancient mode of delivering poetry to its audience. Even better, there's a movement to link performance and print poets in anthologies such as *The Spoken Word Revolution Redux,* which presents poems in both print and audio CD versions.[11] Poets as various as Billy Collins, Mark Strand, Lisa Buscani, Marc Smith, and Kevin Coval offer work on the page and in audio recitation.

Such oral poetries are attracting not only widespread public audiences but also devoted *academic* proponents. In fact, some surprising characters are attempting to unbrick the red-brick walls dividing "academic" and oral poets. In his *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture,* Dana Gioia—ironically regarded by practitioners of "opposing" poetries as a mainstay advocate of genteel, workshop, NEA-supported, traditionalist poetry and thus as the enemy—has roundly praised the emergence of spoken word and performance poetry as a life-giving development. The National Endowment for the Arts, which Gioia until recently headed, has initiated Poetry Out Loud, a national poetry recitation competition for high school students. This dalliance into oral poetry performance has had the curious result of simultaneously disaffecting many academic poets (who fear anything but the page as zone of performance) and discomfiting oral poets (who fear this

incursion onto their turf beacons the establishment's eventual co-opting of their countermovement).

Oral poetry is suddenly the hot topic in university hallways known mostly for their hushed reverence for the printed page. What many academics have viewed as a sham of antipoetry is increasingly regarded as historically rooted in poetry's longstanding oral performativity across cultures and continents. For example, John Miles Foley's exhaustively researched *How to Read an Oral Poem* traces oral poetry as an "international medium" across four continents dating from 600 B.C.E., introducing scholarly examination of performance modes embodied by a Tibetan paper-singer, a North American Slam poet, a South African praise poet, and an ancient Greek bard. Foley's study demonstrates oral poetry's vital cultural roles in the ancient world as well as in our own moment and suggests, provocatively, that the historical prevalence of oral poetry worldwide actually dwarfs "written poetry in size and variety."[12]

Further complicating this bifurcation is the ascendancy of numerous video and new media poetries occasioned by the computer's technological innovations. Most of these electronic poetries place themselves in opposition to current print-based verse culture, so academic poetry now finds itself assailed not only by print- and oral-centered challengers but also by digital poets whose work has moved off the printed page and onto the computer screen. Digital poets such as Brian Kim Stefans, Loss Pequeno Glazier, and Jim Andrews fashion poetic expressions that decenter the authorial "I," favor alterable as opposed to fixed texts, and invite reader interaction with digital poems. Known by a variety of names—e-poetry, Cin(E-)Poetry, rich.lit. Web. art, and so on—these modes blend word, image, sound, and music into a new language of digital poetic expression. Digital poetic modes envision image and word as not merely complementary but interchangeable artistic elements. So consequential do I consider these digital poetries that I've devoted chapter 7 to an extended discussion of their theories and expressions.

In sum, the differences among various manifestations of these two opposed poetic groups are significant and expressive. While the phrasing used to describe this dialectic again has shown itself to be protean, the fundamental division has retained its essential character. One trendy version of the dialectic recently prompted a topical symposium in the literary journal *Boulevard,* which framed the question in this fashion: *Is contemporary poetry dominated more by irony, artifice, and indirection or by sincerity and direct emotional statement?*

Again, the American Aesthetic Pendulum

See it swinging there, as one would in a clichéd horror film's laboratory climax, its huge shimmering blade slicing the dank air of the literary castle, the very dungeon perhaps. There in black and white is the poet as evildoer with hands on the machine's controls and the poet as innocent victim lashed to a metal table beneath the room's swinging doom. There's the poet as mad scientist relishing his own imminent destruction and the poet as buff hero bursting through the padlocked door to save himself from himself. The means of artists' destructions are always their own aesthetic choices—irony and artifice sharpening one half of the blade, sincerity and emotion honing the other. We poets murder ourselves with our choices—or rather, we re-create ourselves, redeem ourselves, remake ourselves (and our art).

This notion has gotten me to thinking about Donald Hall's circa-1962 complaint about the "eternal American tic of talking about art in terms of its techniques."[13] He's right, of course, but what else do we poets have to discern why we like one thing and don't like another? We're doers and makers, evidenced by the Greek "poésis" glossing as "to make" and "poesie" serving as an exact Renaissance equivalent for "makers." So we look to see how it's done as a way of saying why we like it, believe it, want to do it ourselves just like that. (Most poets wouldn't confess to that last part for fear of revealing envy as the basis of so much art.) Or we look to see how it's done in order to figure out why we hate that writing and why others should too. Technique, we figure, is portal to character—both the poet's and the poem's. Thus, judging character, another eternal American tic, seeps into our judgments about the purpose, goals, and limits of art.

Irony or emotion? A form of this question faced the American Moderns at the turn of the last century. They saw before them a vast nineteenth-century wasteland of dripping sentimentality, moral uplift, and general good manners among the main guard of American poetry and asked what had come of it. The Fireside Poets—Holmes, Whittier, and Longfellow—had endeared themselves to a book-reading public not yet tempted by the not-so-subtle diversions awaiting twentieth-century citizens. In the absence of radio, telephone, film, television, easy travel by auto and airplane, and more recent developments of the cell phone, the camera, and the Internet, these poets commanded public attention in ways unimaginable to contemporary poets.

The public literally read their works by the dim glow of fireside and oil lamp. They amounted to a cultural linchpin, united and uniting, defining for a developing country what American poetry could and might be. And they defined for Americans what they as citizens might become. These poets were beloved as much for their avuncular, bearded images as for their homespun messages. For instance, Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life" admonishes readers that "Life is real! Life is earnest!" and concludes with this call to action and sage advice: "Let us, then, be up and doing, / With a heart for any fate; / Still achieving, still pursuing, / Learn to labor and to wait." In this fashion, art seemed to offer an appealing twofer: it bettered one's character and delivered pleasure in the process. To read was to be edified. To be edified brought demure joy.

By the onset of World War I, a broad reading public had arisen, churned up by the notion that art's noblest purpose amounts to *prodessare et delectare,* "to teach and to delight." Righto. The Moderns surveyed the scene and posed unsettling questions about art's role in the supposed eternal upward spiral of societal evolution. They asked what to make of World War I's machine gun, lethal gas, tank, and other means of mass and anonymous death the great minds of our culture had conjured up under the influence of art that taught and delighted. Consider the airplane, the Wright brothers' darling and one of humanity's greatest achievements, giving wings to humans who suddenly seemed, if not godlike, then at least demigods gifted with means to escape earth for the seeable heavens. Roughly ten years old by the time of the Great War, the airplane, humanity's access to the clouds, had already been co-opted as a killing device. Goodbye Wright brothers, hello aerial bombardment.

No wonder those Moderns tossed aside the then-current mode of direct, emotional statement and sought newer ways to speak their poems. Speaking poems, after all, was a way of speaking their world. And that world, Pound's "botched civilization," needed fresh ways to be called up and held accountable, as did poets themselves. In Dada and Surrealism, poets discounted meaning-making altogether, opting out of nineteenth-century poetry's necessary function. Let's play, let's make baby-talk, let's desecrate the very notions that had given themselves over to scientific and artistic evolution, an evolution with such proven lethal results. Eliot's own Impersonal Theory of poetry was a flight away from personality and emotion in favor of universals, things that might bind not separate. It was a search for some means to gather the various pieces of shattered culture and glue them, staple them,

duct tape them into an albeit fragmented but still not unworthy whole—"these fragments I have shorn against my ruins."

The problem with such a notion was not that Eliot had urged irony over emotion and artifice over direct statement. That's one swing of the aesthetic pendulum. The problem was that there existed no aesthetic dialogue, no give and take, no lively quarrel among poets to keep their art alive. Deified, Eliot and his favored mob began to wear the robes of the gods. And this god indeed seemed all powerful. In his *Autobiography,* William Carlos Williams, adopting a metaphor of the atomic age, later described the advent of Eliot's aesthetic as having destroyed his world "like an atom bomb." Williams goes on to explain the effects on him in terms more suited to military not literary battle: "To me especially it struck like a sardonic bullet. I felt at once that it had set me back twenty years. . . . 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."[14] Poetry in the American grain, innovative and forward-looking, as Williams conceived it, had given way to something else indeed, something refined and footnotable.

It's not hard to foresee the subsequent arrival of the New Critics, those hoping to protect the pure mysteries of poetry against the encroachment of scientific positivism. When the New Critics "fled Imagism and Chicago," as George Williamson describes it, "into the Metaphysical seventeenth-century," they escaped Modernist chaos and thus reasserted lines of social governance and religious belief seemingly severed by the dominant culture.[15] The New Criticism favored by poets such as John Crowe Ransom and by scores of university English Department scholars such as Cleanth Brooks leapt at Eliot's complex poetry as a way to undergird a system of reading and writing that could be defined, evaluated, and defended. And they used the "classroom," as Williams remarked, as setting and means to inculcate their way of reading poetry. Importantly, only certain poetry warranted and rewarded such close reading, so the effect was to silence other modes of writing via the blunt instrument of New Critical inattention. Hence, the New Critics became the curmudgeons (or saints) who ruled American poetry until the late fifties uprisings of Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Kerouac, Burroughs, and the rest of the Beats. Ginsberg's "Howl" lamented the woeful fate of "the best minds" of his generation in an era of buttoned-down uniformity that cast out those scandalous others who possessed alternative aesthetics or lifestyles. Ferlinghetti's poetry offered a carnivalesque *Coney Island of the Mind* that stood in riotous

contrast to the conservative poet's decorous *Elbow-Patched Tweed Sport Coat of the Mind.*

Surely, the so-called generation of '62, Wright, Bly, Merwin, Kinnell, Levertov, Stafford, and others, faced a version of this question, as had the Moderns before them. New Critical irony, paradox, and tension reigned supreme—that half of the aesthetic blade—so what was a poet to do? Rebel, of course, as the lot of them did in sundry ways that shared one principle. That notion is a renewed appreciation of intuition and the inner life of the self moving among a world of fellow beings and, more important, a yearning for epiphanies to be had through modes of emotion the New Critics had outlawed or roundly castigated as sophomoric.

It wasn't long before Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, adapted her beloved forms of inherited English tradition, say, the ballad, to the subjects of Chicago's Bronzeville. She introduced into her work as well the language of street corner and tenement after a watershed moment at the Fisk Black Writers Conference in 1967, thereafter tapping into and giving life to the Black Arts Movement. This same "awakening" resulted in her refusal of major publishing houses in favor of smaller but exclusively black publishers, especially the Broadside Press. With the move, Brooks's work also changed aesthetic locales, abandoning the compressed imagery and forms of her earlier work for a mode influenced by the improvisations of jazz. With similar rebelliousness, Adrienne Rich, precocious Yale Series of Younger Poets Award winner and one of the few female darlings of modern poetry, set fire to her aesthetic bed. In "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Rich admits her early style was steeped in the patriarchal mode of male poets such as "Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, Auden, MacNeice, Stevens, and Yeats."[16] Born, as she describes it, "white and middle class into a house full of books," Rich had redefined herself by 1970, she says, as "a radical feminist."[17] The transition was startling, and her edgy, socially conscious poetry shoveled fresh dirt upon the grave of New Critical propriety. Suddenly, the countermovement was THE movement.

The Aesthetic Orphan

Here's where literary history gets problematic for most young poets, as indeed it was for me. Coming of age in the late seventies and early eighties, I saw the argument against the New Critics as abundantly obvious. Or rather, it

was not really an argument, but simply a conclusion. My poetic masters had overthrown the houses of their literary daddies and mommies, and they had struck out on their own. I did not. Instead I became their aesthetic's adopted orphan, happy to do the chores, take out the trash, and mind my manners. As with most of my peers, I inherited the then-current counteraesthetic without question. I did not view it as provisional, temporary, or historical—all the very things any aesthetic plants its roots in. I did not fathom its reaction to the previous aesthetic godhead as historically inscripted, determined by forces of culture and society larger than itself. Nor did I note its tendrils in poets' modes developed centuries earlier.

Like so many other poets of my generation, I failed to *contextualize* an aesthetic I instead naively regarded as outside the bounds of art's historical give and take. It was simply mine, inevitable and unchanging. I did not conceive of myself as inheriting an aesthetic that was challenged before my time and would be similarly disputed years later, after we two had grown tired together. There was no dialogue, only the deafening chants of my side, the *only* side.

The arguments of my poetic youth were always against the dead, or those soon to be. They seemed straw men and women, not flesh and blood and piss and vinegar like me. Every essay I wrote, every poem I scribbled, assumed the same aesthetic underpinnings. So many of my peers felt the same we hardly needed to argue over cheap beers at rented kitchen tables. We knew it with youth's pure artistic certainty, unsullied by doubt or experience. We knew it deep in our "dark, stone, earth, blood, bones"—as the Deep Imagists might have fashioned it. We simply knew emotion trumped artifice, that a "sincere" voice trumped the rhetorical, that the inner life trumped the outer, communal world. We didn't understand the "plain" voice was itself a form of rhetoric. We didn't understand it was impossible to avoid rhetoric if one speaks, if one utters a word and asks that it be heard. We never understood that to be purposefully unartful is to be purposefully artful. Just read Frank O'Hara, will you, and tell me that voice isn't crafted, isn't sanded and buffed and shined. His work may appear merely the instant's apt eruption, but much labor has been done to give it that disguise. In "Adam's Curse" Yeats laments that although a single line may well take "hours" to perfect, "Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught." The pen *is* a needle, stitching line by line the fabric of a poem we poets hold against our chests—and the world's—to check its fit.

In the quarter century that followed, we've seen Derrida, Foucault, and the Language poets. We've seen Wittengstein come back from the dead. We've seen the forceful emergence of feminist, lesbian, gay, Asian, Hispanic, and postcolonial poetry of all stripes. African American poets, one can argue, have moved from the margins to the mainstream, if not in content then in importance and ascendancy. From the fringes, cowboy poetry, slam poetry, flarf poetry, and electronic poetry have engaged capricious audiences growing with mitotic frenzy. As Marjorie Perloff suggests, "The map of twentieth-century poetry thus becomes an increasingly differentiated and complex space," replete with temblors and "ruptures" that rattle its unstable topography.[18] Each of these poets has faced the same question. Is it artifice or emotion? Is it irony or vulnerability? Is it theory or feeling? Which is the me I'm after? Or perhaps, which is the not-me I'm after?

What's the contemporary scene? Much of our present poetry, of course, reacts to the previous era's preference for direct lyrical or narrative statement, and thus the pendulum has swung again. We live in an era in which irony wields for its artistic practitioners a shield of protective hipness. If one cares about nothing, if one believes in nothing, then one can't be hurt. Irony's unassailable. It offers a means for the poet to comment on the current array of human frailties without need to venture any palliative words or any potentially embarrassing remedies. And there is a good bit of that poetry twinkling around in the magazines. Tony Hoagland aptly describes this as the era's "skittery poem," a mode in which "systematic development is out" and "obliquity, fracture, and discontinuity are in." Hoagland asserts the obvious—that among young poets especially there is a "widespread distrust of narrative forms" and a concurrent "pervasive sense of the inadequacy or exhaustion of all modes other than the associative."[19] Some of that poetry is shockingly fresh and good. Some, too, looms icy in its coolness, breathlessly ethereal in its aloofness. Sometimes surface masquerades as intellectual depth, as does an assumed theoretical superiority. If the reader doesn't get it, then the reader's at fault. She's either too dim to catch the philosophical drift, or she's so jejune in the first place as to believe poetry is about a poet composing and a reader understanding a conveyable meaning. Artifice without emotion?

Is this good for American poetry? Well, yes. But alone it is not. Look around, and you will find a counterswing's incipient motion. Narrative poetry, despite or perhaps because of its being decidedly out of fashion,

shows surprising pertinacity. You'll also find many poets who clothespin their emotions on the line for all to see. How else explain, say, the raft of new Confessional poets who are more than happy to describe their divorces, their sexual proclivities, or even the stunning resemblance of their pubic hair to a famous waterfall. How many poems do we encounter about Daddy's alcoholism, a messy divorce, or the night prayers of a child? Emotion without artifice?

Life-Giving Dialogue

What interests me most is the way many poets and thinkers consider the dialogue's effects on American poetry to be destructive not generative. Some believe this blizzard of aesthetic dialogue freezes not perpetuates American poetry's continuing evolution. For instance, even the esteemed critic Perloff has portrayed the current state as both "chaotic" and "anarchic," an "odd kind of scramble" where competing definitions of the "new poetry" vie for attention and succession to power. The result, Perloff asserts, is that readers find it "impossible to keep up with even most prominent and highly praised poets."[20] In my view, however, it's not the existence but the *lack* of opposing aesthetic camps that stultifies art. When an all-powerful monolithic aesthetic rules the day, both poets and their poetry slip into unknowing self-parody. One does what one does because one always has, everyone following the same lemming-like slow-motion trundle over the cliff of the comfortable, the acceptable, the known and well received—aka bad art.

If American poetry indeed manifests polarization into opposing camps, the very argumentation between these camps promotes rather than extinguishes our poetry's vibrant future. To decry the lack of a ruling poetic Leviathan is to beg the aesthetic police to come lock one up so that Thomas Hobbesian order might be reestablished across the land. The view through those jail bars might well be placid, but it's unequivocally deadly for art and for the self. Art does not flourish in a dictatorship, whether political or aesthetic. In time, one clique may take temporary precedence over the other. As long as the opposition's voice is heard, as long as their means of conveying it to audiences is not silenced, then this dialogue vivifies American poetry.

Poetry magazine seems to have intuited just this point, as its editors have toyed with a rousing series of "Pure Products" interchanges between poets of opposing camps. Its May 2007 issue inaugurates the feature with Ange

Mlinko's glowing review of Language poet Charles Bernstein's *Girly Man* going toe-to-toe with David Yezzi's championing of the more conventional Morri Creech's *Field Knowledge.* Each critic then interrogates the other's critical, theoretical, and aesthetic judgments in a lively give and take that in the process outlines stark divisions in each camp's view of what makes for good poetry. Sarcasm and one-liners aside, the format bristles with an electric AC/DC aesthetic current that, admittedly, may not persuade either reviewer to change her/his poetic flag but does succeed in clarifying the issues at hand. At best, one learns from the other, as does the reader who's privy to a discussion that ought to take place in the classroom and in the coffeehouse *more* not less often than it does currently.

Just as surely as one group took power, its opposite camp will in time reassert aesthetic preeminence as human tastes, experiences, and desires evolve over time. This pendulum swing of power and taste muscles in poetry's possibilities not its extinction.

For poets, the nuts and bolts of this long-running esoteric argument matter in ways most readers and critics can't imagine or simply can't relate to. Every poet knows the following paradox. Sometimes cold artifice proffers surprisingly social or emotional rewards. Play around with a pantoum, work in syllabics, experiment with the prose poem, or try on for size the tight-jeaned, elliptical intelligence of America's smartest poet, and see what happens. Frequently, it goes like this. While fixated on surface matters such as the sonnet's thorny rhyme scheme, one falls into a raw emotional epiphany. And the reverse is as often true. One turns from the perfect crown of sonnets and breaks it willfully, shatters it audaciously, to say something outright for once, for chrissake, form be damned.

What I am saying is that the pendulum oscillates from extreme to extreme—and takes us with it—so we poets might slay and thus remake ourselves and our art.

What happens to a poet who wishes fervently to abjure membership in either of these feuding factions, instead cherry-picking from each as she sees fit along the path to something new just over the aesthetic horizon? What becomes of one who desires to be more than merely "academic" or "language" or "performance" poet? What befalls the poet who refuses the *brand* applied by all of these labels and rejects as well the implicit *marketing* that comes along with it? What if one wants to keep open all possibilities of art, not simply those approved by competing cadres of fascist rule-loving thugs

in literary disguise? That poet, in my view, may be the real aesthetic hero—and the rarest for it, as well.

How might poets such as this fare in a realm that worships these poles? Likely, these poets suffer because they're not affiliated with either camp and thus don't benefit from the privileges of membership accruing thereto. No editors, journals, presses, reviewers, coffeehouses, critics, or theorists sing these poets' praises simply as a result of their belonging to the club and knowing the received style's secret handshake. These poets risk the scorn of both camps for not being hip to either side's mode of writing, *the* mode as both camps contrarily proclaim it. In turn, these poets also wager losing the networking support offered by both sides—whether it's the university teaching job or the slam café gig. They're proverbial lone wolves whose quest for poetic possibility transcends the comfort afforded by the pack.

It's strikingly obvious that it's possible now for a poet to associate only with other poets who favor her same loyalty to, say, formalist, feminist, or spoken word poetries. Such is the ghettoizing of American poetry that allegiances formed by aesthetic inclination divide each from each in a manner not unlike the familiar high school scene where "jocks" steer away from the "stoners" and the "preppies" scorn the brainy "nerds." Have we not evolved beyond such aesthetic sophomorics? This sort of balkanization of American poetry may well be inevitable in a pluralistic society. However, it need not be destructive if these groups seek interchange more fertile than the mere silent rebuke of the turned shoulder. That interchange is the seed ground for aesthetic evolution.

Poets share one common, dual obligation. Poets must know if not honor the rich feast of poetry's heritage, but they must also bring something new to the table. Whitman claimed the poet who does not bring forth new forms is not wanted. Searching for that something new can deliver poets to fresh, innovative technique or to epiphanic revelation. Whatever. This vital newness is what's necessary and redemptive, whatever its source. It resides in questing and not in slavish devotion to theories or modes of writing one inherits unconsciously like a sort of poetic DNA.

Art, genuine art, falls silent in a monologue. When only one mode carries the flag, the flag's blank.

CHAPTER 2

"The Only Courage Is Joy!"

Ecstasy and Doubt in James Wright's Poetry

More than thirty years ago I first pondered what made James Wright's poems so otherworldly worldly, mulling what made them—and him—so much of this place and at once so foreign, exotic, unearthly. Bluejean-jacketed grad-student poets, Dean Young and I sat not ten feet from the very spot Hoagy Carmichael wrote his hallmark "Stardust" on a borrowed, after-hours piano. For two Hoosiers this was sacred ground. No matter it was then a dumpy pizza joint, its red bricks infused with tomato sauce and warm beer. Outside the low gray sky gave forth Midwestern winter. Inside I shook my head, the portal to Wright's "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" floating just beyond my reach, open and hauntingly taunting. Then the snow stopped. Of a sudden my face and the fireplace flames, reflected in window glass, floated disembodied in the gloaming. For an instant, I saw me beside me, there and yet not. One self sat blessedly flummoxed by Wright's poem, while my other flushed with the ecstatic rush of understanding. Then the door slammed shut. Someone in jeans and boots walked across my face and the fire.

I / *"I have come a long way, to surrender my shadow / to the shadow of a horse."*

More than any American poet of the recent past, James Wright seems at once attracted to both poles of the bifurcated American poetics detailed in our opening chapter. Wright appears simultaneously enamored and yet distrustful of a poem's ability to embody the ecstatic moment. On one hand, Wright's poems show his yearning for transcendent release, emotional if not

physical escape, and ecstatic reverie initiated by contact with the natural. On the other, a number of poems reveal intent to keep his feet on the ground and his head out of the clouds. Here, we find a poet fixated on human limitation and on the ultimately dangerous enticements of natural communion. Thus, while Wright's poems may indeed express ecstatic "states of knowledge" much like those described by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience,* Wright also acknowledges the limits of these reveries. In my view, this give and take animates Wright's poetry throughout his career and affords his work its most meaningful tensions. This essential "dialogic relationship," as M. M. Bakhtin might describe it, illuminates the terrain of Wright's (and American poetry's) polar modes, offering a more satisfying view than that given by discussions of mere form and technique—my own included. In short, Wright struggles with poetry's thorniest issue. Ought poetry to "disenchant and disintoxicate," as Auden argues in *The Dyer's Hand*?[1] Or should poetry instead elevate and affirm, proffering Emerson's poet-Seer ecstatic glimpses beyond ordinary reality? This then, at root and wing, is a poet's argument with himself regarding the purpose and boundaries of poetic experience. Nothing more, nothing less.

In that regard, Wright's argument with himself is as much ontological as it is aesthetic. In facing the moment, Wright acknowledges the nastiness that exists and the resolute beauty that endures despite all odds. In the depths and heights of ecstatic experience, Wright seeks the nature of being human—and of being human in Nature. Wright is attracted to ecstatic forms of reverie not simply as means to euphoric joy but also as means to enhanced understanding. Growing up in Martins Ferry along the Ohio River, Wright encounters firsthand what havoc industrialized culture could wreak upon pastoral beauty—and observes as well the damage such labor could exact in the lives of people who toiled there.[2] The ecstatic doubly provides him with means of flight from and angles of perception into that world of jumbled ugliness and beauty.

I'll admit to feeling a little foolish talking of ecstatic inklings of natural union. I think of Brecht lamenting how he lived in an age when talking about beautiful trees meant being silent about considerable evil. I think of Elie Wiesel fretting justifiably how art can seem selfishly frivolous in the post-Holocaust world. I think of writers who fell silent after 9-11 and those who should've but didn't. What, then, is so compelling about a visionary poet ready and willing to "surrender" his inner life to the "shadow of a horse"?

2 / *". . . to keep one's eyes open"*

Ecstasy. The word derives from the Greek *existanai*–"to displace." Thus, poets who undergo flights of ecstasy are displaced, moved beyond themselves to inhabit, if only briefly, an alternate reality. They stand beside themselves, as Edward Hirsch reminds us, paradoxically apart from and yet part of the unified field of being, a universal Oneness. (Likewise, when we readers say we are "moved" by a poem, we mean we are "displaced" or "transported" by it.)[3] Ecstasy's secondary meaning is "to drive one out of one's senses," implying the poet's being lifted out of one state into an altered reality. This suggests, one might well argue, the fundamental activity of lyric poetry: deep seeing. For Wright it is, as well, a characteristically conflicted aspect of the poetic experience. For this poet, "seeing" brings forth both its blessing and its curse.

Wright's quest for poetry that might actually embody not merely describe the ecstatic gives his work an appealing emotional and intellectual vulnerability. It also leaves his work susceptible not only to the pendulum swings of aesthetic taste but also to the petty disputations of literary quarrels. Depending on one's critical camp, Wright is the poster child or the whipping boy of what in the sixties was hailed as the (next) "new poetry." This tired "story," as the late William Matthews stingingly labels it, often revolves around the supposed Svengali-like influence of Robert Bly.[4] These discussions ultimately devolve into glib distinctions between Wright's initial fondness for staid Neoclassical metrics and his conversion to more flexible Romantic forms. Most propose theories of how and why the Neoclassical master of *The Green Wall* (1957) and *Saint Judas* (1959) gave himself over to the Deep Image experimentation of *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963) and to his subsequent dabbling with the "flat voice" as well as the prose poem. In short, critics either heartily praise or sadly bemoan Wright's transition. Pick your side. David Baker fairly summarizes the choices: Wright is either "one of our age's great lyric poets" or a "sentimentalist and egoist, whose movements toward increased openness of form betray a poem's imperative for formal constraint and dignity."[5] In the sixties, Wright himself chafed under the insipid nattering issuing from both sides. He abhorred how the era's bifurcated poetic modes reduced poetry's vast possibilities simply to (a) poems with feeling and (b) poems without. At once frustrated with and bored by

these paired eenie-meenie choices, Wright openly shows his exasperation in this short, unpublished fragment:

> *The boring, yapping schools*
> *of beat and slick.*
> *They make me sick.*[6]

Surely Wright felt trapped by the two sleeves of the then-current literary straitjacket, and he labored fervently to free his hand. "What I had hoped to do from the beginning," Wright once told an interviewer, "was to continue to grow in the sense that I might go on discovering for myself new possibilities of writing."[7] Happily, with the discovery of Wright's unpublished *Amenities of Stone* (1961–62), the volume meant to follow *Saint Judas* into print but that Wright chose to suppress, readers have a better appreciation for Wright's painstaking intellectual and aesthetic evolution. In fact, as if to give context to his own evolving poetic, Wright once considered using the fragment quoted earlier as an epigraph to *Amenities'* unpublished forerunner *Now I Am Awakened* (1960).[8]

Wright desires to be a poet who *perceives* instead of *imposes* order in the world; thus, for him, to perceive is to see in the broadest sense imaginable. Seeing is at once mysticism's fundamental act and its reward: enlightenment. In this light, Wright follows the notable American tradition that regards seeing as elemental to poetic revelation. Emerson's poet as Seer achieves understanding through the paradoxical act of looking outward as a way to see inward. Natural facts, Emerson reminds us in *Nature* (1836), are also "spiritual facts." Emerson's ecstatic (if not bizarre) longing to move through the world like some hypersensitive "transparent eyeball" betrays his yearning to be one on whom nothing is lost, one wholly in communion with the unseen become seen. In this fashion, it leaves Emerson, like Wright, vulnerable to being poked in the eye by petulant disbelievers. Hugo Von Hofmannsthal suggests that such a poet operates in the world anyway "as if his eyes had no lids." That poet might well be the fully awake person Thoreau himself searches for but is unable to find, the poet so bright with the blinding light of understanding that Thoreau would not dare "look him in the eyes." In *Ecstasy, Ritual, and Alternate Reality,* cultural anthropologist Felicitas Goodman gives an account of a small terra-cotta statue that virtually embodies these dual human roles of being in the world but seeing beyond it. Found in current-

day Tlatilco, the 3,300-year-old statue possesses two faces, two mouths, two noses, but curiously "three large eyes, for the faces share one eye." Goodman describes the character in this way: "She is one integrated person, but turning one way, she looks into ordinary reality; turning the other way, she contemplates its alternative aspect. That is what humans are about."[9]

Wright himself appreciates the polar (or complementary?) goals of seeing embodied by this ancient statue. In fact, Wright so esteems the act of seeing that he gauges one's humanity by how good one is at doing it: "Simply to *be* a man (instead of one more variety of automaton, of which we have some tens of thousands) means to keep one's eyes open."[10] Surely Wright means to keep one's eyes open to numinous relationships, to signs of spiritual communion immanent in the world. Just as likely Wright also has in mind the attentiveness necessary to keep one from being duped—from being the unwitting fool of advertisers, of politicians, and, yes, of one's own naive intimations of union with the natural. In his first collection, *The Green Wall,* Wright stakes this latter claim in "A Fit against the Country," a dialogic text in which two voices of the self argue the risks of ecstatic communion with the natural. "A Fit against the Country," in fact, pointedly refuses the ecstatic moment derived by looking into an "alternate reality." Rather, the poem posits a cautionary argument against this very reverie. Recalling the alluring beauty of hearing a sparrow's call, seeing a tanager's bright color, smelling "fallen" apples' odor, the speaker addresses in turn his five senses as if they were somehow isolated from his mind. Doing so, the speaker evinces a profound Cartesian dualism, an odd sort of body-mind dialogic. For instance, the speaker says, "Ear, you have heard that song," as if the ear alone experienced the bird's musical trill. Moreover, the speaker remains steadfastly detached from what the unvoiced speaker is most tempted by—the mystical act of becoming "ravished out of thought" by these sensual delights. Instead of giving himself over to ecstatic reverie, the speaker issues his pointed-finger warning in iambic trimeter, cautioning the body to

. . . hold your humor away
Away from the tempting tree,
The grass, the luring summer,
That summon the flesh to fall.
Be glad of the green wall
You climbed across one day

When winter stung with ice
That vacant paradise.[11]

Both the poem's postlapsarian, nearly Puritan theme and its curious delight in human separation from nature's "green wall" amount to decidedly New Critical gestures. Like black crepe, that mood hung in the air in the forties and fifties. Wright no doubt learned it at the feet of his early masters at Kenyon College—one of them, John Crowe Ransom, conceivably the New Criticism's major figure. No group of poets was less likely to embark happily on a flight of fancy unmitigated by an equal dose of damnable reality. Don't forget, there was paradox, irony, and tension, a recipe for retaining balance in a world fast spinning toward chaos. Always at hand there was control, something to answer scientific positivism's love of order with literary formulas through which *X* might dependably be solved. In such a view, the unknown resides only outside of the poem. In the tense, conflicted era of the Cold War, who'd not thus prefer poetry to life's indeterminacy?

For a working-class kid like James Wright, the New Critic's mantle of Neoclassical learning and erudition must have been enticing. Its sturdy broadcloth would hide the steel and coal dust Wright carried with him from Martins Ferry, and it would lend him legitimacy he was never privy to down home. Hence, Latin—years of Latin. Wright must have figured if he'd not be seated at this crowd's table, at least he'd be able to read the menu.

While at Kenyon, Wright drank deeply at the Neoclassical well. A bright and disciplined student, Wright was awarded his Kenyon College B.A. degree magna cum laude on June 9, 1952. Wright's transcript confirms that during his years there he studied Roman history, Greek history, Milton, Chaucer, Spenser and the English Renaissance, the English seventeenth-century lyric, English and American lyric poetry, and even Ransom's own "Poetic Analysis" course that one can wager practiced New Critical modes of interpretation. One anthropology course was devoted to "Primitive Literature," the phrase itself a telling indication of how *that* literature was valued compared to the courses listed earlier.[12] Moreover, Wright's course of study demanded intellectual rigor few of us endured in our undergraduate years. For example, one eight-page fill-in-the-blank, identification, and short-answer exam in Professor Charles Coffin's English 29: Seventeenth-Century Lyric course asks Wright and his classmates for in-depth knowledge of selected poems by Donne, Herbert, Jonson, and Herrick.[13] A six-page section of the exam tests

students by providing poetic quotations ranging in length from one to eight lines. In response, students are expected to give forth on how these selections express "the poet's learning, religion, literary themes and influences, acquaintances with popular customs and 'ideas,' his social and devotional practices, and his private life." Only that. And what, by the way, is conjured up by "social and devotional practices"? Readers, try this one:

> *The sun is lost, and th' earth, and no man's wit*
> *Can well direct him where to look for it.*

To this, Wright correctly answered, "The disturbance of the Ptolemaic universe by the 'new philosophy.'" But who was "Sir Clipsby Crew"? (Correct: Herrick's friend.) And "Helen White"? (Correct: *The Metaphysical Poets,* New York, 1936). The *Epigrams*? (Wright's answer: "Jonson, Herrick—a verse form adapted from classics," earned him half a credit.) Later, the exam's final page lists seventeen words that compose, in Josephine Miles's phrase, these poets' "majority vocabulary"—in other terms, their favorite poetic words. (Ironically, some critics would later smack Wright's hand for his so-called Deep Imagist fondness for overusing words such as "dark," "rock," and "stone.") Now, like Coffin's students, let's identify which seventeenth-century lyric poet most favors each of these: "sun," "grow," "sweet." Wright's correct answers were, respectively: Donne, Jonson, and Herrick.

3 / *"I want to be lifted up / By some great white bird . . ."*

My point is that Wright was steeped in the Neoclassical tradition. Deciding to try something else surely brought him pangs of doubt as well as of guilt, literary and otherwise. In his conversation with Dave Smith, Wright speaks knowingly of William James's notion of the "conversion experience" put forth in James's *Varieties.* Although Wright claims never to have "wanted" such a conversion for himself and denies that he "calculated . . . to be born again," that transformation may well have occurred, bidden or not. In truth, Wright makes clear that he's pondered the matter: "Well, there is such a thing as a conversion experience surely. William James has written of it formally in his *Varieties of Religious Experience.* That change is a reality. Let me say that to change one's poetry would be, in effect, to change one's life. I don't think that one can change one's life simply as an act of will."[14] This makes all the more

remarkable Wright's labors in *Amenities* and his stunning breakthroughs in *Branch,* a book whose most notable poems pursue the very ecstatic modes "A Fit against the Country" so contentiously counsels against.

In truth, the books' best-known poems fairly well manifest what James in *Varieties* identifies as the four keynotes of "mystical" experience.[15] First, "ineffability." The experience "defies expression" so frustratingly that "no adequate report of its contents can be given in words."[16] Yet the mystic persists in trying to do just that—convey his mystical experience to others—even though the experience must be "directly experienced" and cannot be "imported" to others. Second, a "noetic quality." Those who experience mystical flight regard its "states of feeling" rather as "states of knowledge," insights into "depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. . . . illuminations, revelations, full of significance."[17] Third, "transciency." Mystical states cannot be "sustained for long," and just as important, their "quality" is elusive as opposed to eidetic, meaning its images can only be "imperfectly reproduced in memory."[18] Last, "passivity." Once the "characteristic consciousness has set in," the mystic feels as if his "own will were in abeyance" to that of some higher power. This sense of unity and oneness lingers long after the individual's mystical state has ended, in effect modifying "the inner life of the subject."[19] James's own intense if infrequent encounters with mystical experience of this sort led him to "understand . . . what a poet is." Unlike James, who admits he "can't find a single word for all that significance," a poet is someone who can feel these immensely complex influences and "make some partial tracks in them for verbal statement."[20] Perhaps no two poems better illustrate these ecstatic tendencies in Wright's work than the well-known "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" and "A Blessing." The first poem is brief enough to quote in its entirety:

Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
Asleep on the black trunk,
Blowing like a leaf in green shadow.
Down the ravine behind the empty house,
The cowbells follow one another
Into the distances of the afternoon.
To my right,
In a field of sunlight between two pines,
The droppings of last year's horses

Blaze up into golden stones.
I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on.
A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home.
I have wasted my life.

In short, the poem records the process and the instant of ecstatic revelation. It therefore embodies the "noetic" quality James assigns to these encounters. The speaker—surely one is tempted to say Wright himself—contemplates his natural surroundings that appear both harmonious and capable of marvelous transformations that elude him. In the "shadow" world of mystical experience, a "bronze" butterfly can blow like a "leaf"; mere horse droppings may undergo a stunning alchemy and become "golden stones." Even a chicken hawk floats over looking not for supper but for home (not "a home" but simply "home," implying one awaits him). For a man lounging in a hammock at someone else's farm, a husband and father like Wright enduring the pains of marital separation and eventual divorce from his hometown girl, the word "home" carries immense implications. Who'd not envy the natural harmony? Who'd not wish for the chance to transform the refuse of one's life into gold? Who'd not suddenly realize the great waste of it and desire to put one's life in harmony with natural if not spiritual order? The poem, then, is both the speaker's celebration of numinous natural order and his statement of longing to align his life with it.

The difficulty in writing poetry of the ecstatic is overcoming what James calls the "ineffability" of the mystical experience. How to re-create within readers these "illuminations" when words seem inadequate to the task? Wright discovers one thing that keeps getting in his way: the Neoclassical "rhetoric" of his earlier mode. On a March 6, 1962, draft of an unpublished poem, "Two Images of One Place," Wright confesses: "It occurs to me that my first . . . letter to the Blys was a cry of longing: 'What must I do to be saved?' Answer: 'Cut the rhetoric.' Okay, I fight on." Here's that strategy enacted in an unpublished September 3, 1960, draft of what was then titled "Lying in a Hammock at Pine Island, Minnesota." The penciled-in strikethroughs actually appear in Wright's typescript draft.[21]

The monarch butterfly sleeping against the pine branch
Is changing to dark green bronze.
At the end of the ravine behind Duffy's house

The droppings of last year's horses dry into golden stones.
As evening comes a little closer home, suddenly I ~~can~~ hear
The ~~quick sharp outcry of a rabbit~~ brief cry of a rabbit.
I ~~seem to~~ have wasted my whole life.

True enough, the elimination of extra verbiage, especially in the poem's last line, measurably accentuates the poem's revelation. Doing so also quickens the expression of ecstatic awareness—the act of "seeing" that elevates the poem beyond mere mimetic description. Still, Wright does not so much eliminate rhetoric altogether—which indeed is impossible—but rather replaces one form of rhetoric with another. Notice the way Wright's final version highlights an already achieved conversion. In the final version the butterfly is by now bronze, not merely in the process of "changing." In addition, that version intensifies the horse droppings' transformational act by substituting "blaze up" for the draft's mundane "dry into." In essence, Wright struggles his way toward a language of the ecstatic.

Nowhere is that more evident than in Wright's "A Blessing," another poem closing with a natural pyrotechnic display of sudden epiphany. In the poem the speaker and a friend get off the "highway" to Rochester, Minnesota, and step over "barbed wire" to engage two Indian ponies in a pasture. Doing so, the friends cross between realms that religious historian Mercea Eliade describes elsewhere as the "profane" and "the sacred," humanity's two existential "modes of being in the world."[22] In Eliade's view, the profane addresses exclusively life's material dimensions, its focus on economics and politics, while the sacred realm acknowledges a holy reality that stands in stark contrast to the quotidian, commonsense world. Thus, in Eliade's view, the sacred domain is infused with numinous, mystical properties that appeal to one's aesthetic senses.

What's more, at the men's arrival these ponies' eyes "darken with kindness," signaling a resolution of opposites characteristic of the mystical experience. William James, in fact, cites the appearance in mystical accounts of "self-contradictory phrases" such as "whispering silence" and "dazzling obscurity" as evidence that the mystic is overcoming the "usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute."[23] In Wright's poem, a simple interchange between the human and the natural results in a similar startling revelation arriving via a "black and white" horse whose very colors signal a reconciling of opposites in one body:

I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand
. . . . . .
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.

In experiencing the throes of the ecstatic, in leaving the body to stand, "displaced," beside it, the speaker is indeed driven "out of one's senses." Keep in mind, however, that some would argue that allowing oneself to lifted out of one's senses is actually unsophisticated and irresponsible, possibly even dangerous. This reverie is especially perilous if it distorts not discloses reality. In the words and tenor of "A Fit against the Country," this speaker might simply be "ravished out of thought," and shamefully so. What would Wright's Neoclassical masters think about that? In one regard, what's remarkable about Wright's "A Blessing" may be not so much that he wrote the poem but that he felt compelled to blunt its ecstatic moment. After the poem (under the title "The Blessing") had been accepted for publication by *Poetry,* he sent editor John Frederick Nims a revision that he hoped would replace the accepted version. Wright's revision deletes the two lines that describe the speaker's touching the horse's ear (and the subsequent awareness of commingled human and natural qualities). Most important, Wright enacts two fundamental alterations to the poem that deaden its vivifying ecstatic reverie. First, he retitles the poem "Just Off the Highway to Rochester, Minnesota" and thus strikes any mention of "blessing" from the title, excising the event's redemptive spiritual essence. He also recasts (and thus qualifies) the closing's invocation of revelation. In the revision, "Suddenly I realize" becomes a pitifully muted "Suddenly I *think*" (my italics), thereby inserting doubt amid the speaker's epiphanic knowledge.[24] All this, the late Nims squashed by dint of sufficient editorial vision—and poetic soul—to insist on printing the earlier version readers have since come to admire. In a note to me some years before his death, Nims remarked that he was glad he had "the good sense to prefer the first version," concluding that Wright's reworking the poem amounted to "a warning against the wrong kind of revision."

In Wright's "A Blessing" and other poems of ecstatic experience, as in the vast majority of mystical accounts, animals serve as ambassadors of an alternate reality. Strange, how things *of* this world afford flight *from* it. In many of these poems, Wright seems either in transport or waiting expectantly for it; he remains, in Heidegger's phrase, "always underway" toward some greater understanding or larger merging. For Wright, even a brief list of these transcendent agents would include the "great white bird" that the speaker of "The Minneapolis Poem" wishes would both transport and hide the speaker among the "secrets of the wheat"; the horse "saddled, browsing in grass, [w]aiting" for the speaker of "A Dream of Burial"; and the "blue horse, dancing / Down a road, alone" of "Sitting in a Small Screenhouse on a Summer Morning," a poem in which the speaker surrenders his "shadow" to "the shadow of a horse." One poem from *Branch,* "Arriving in the Country Again," mingles all three ecstatic elements—horse, bird, and shadow. Here's the entire text of the poem:

The white house is silent.
My friends can't hear me yet.
The flicker who lives in the bare tree at the field's edge
Pecks once and is still for a long time.
I stand still in the late afternoon.
My face is turned away from the sun.
A horse grazes in my long shadow.

In "Arriving in the Country Again," Wright enters the community of joy. Yes, this "country" is, on one hand, pastoral and thus physical. On the other, it's an emotional and transcendent locale, a place intangible but real. Don't forget, this is the same "country" Wright had spat out his petulant "fit against" in the first poem of his first collection. Here, the speaker's setting off for this "country" again signals escape from what Eliade labels the "profane" world, and his arrival embodies his entrance into the intangible realm of the "sacred." This country is inhabited not only by the speaker's "friends" but also by creatures that express, merely by going about the business of being natural entities, the elemental oneness of all creation. Agents of the speaker's vision, the woodpecker and the horse are not mere Romantic scenery. Instead, they evoke a deep "seeing" through which the speaker finds comforting unity.

Time has little consequence in such a "country." In fact, the speaker's

ecstatic experience seems suspended entirely out of time; he has arrived but is still unheard by his friends. In that brief but mystically expanded instant, he turns "away from the sun" and looks into the shadow world in much the same fashion as the ancient terra-cotta figure Goodman describes. What he sees there is an intimation of the generative power of inner spiritual life. Not only does the speaker feed off his shadow's spiritual vigor, but so also does the horse. The speaker stands at once in the world and yet lifted by ecstasy to see beyond it.

Allow me to drop the ruse of "the speaker." Wright's own handwritten comments on a March 6, 1962, draft of the poem make abundantly clear that he is the poem's speaker and its location is the Minnesota farmhouse of Robert and Carol Bly. Furthermore, Wright's comments emphasize his wish for the poem itself to be the experience, not a mere after-the-fact-story about it. In truth, he craves for the poem to overcome James's supposed "ineffability" of the ecstatic and convey to readers his pure, unmitigated joy. Here are Wright's own scribbled comments on the poem's draft: "I like this. What I mean is that standing alone outside the Blys' house, I felt really happy. If that feeling is not embodied in the poem, then the poem is nothing."[25] For Wright, experiencing unadulterated joy is no small achievement. If the poem does not bear the full measure of this joy, if it cannot transport its reader as its writer was transported by ecstasy—then "the poem is nothing." Think of the standard Wright has implicitly set here. "Bah," Wright says, "to mystical ineffability." A poem, no, *his* poem must surmount this seemingly insurmountable barrier.

One might well ask to whom Wright is speaking in these brilliant and unguarded outbursts. To an imagined critic? To literary history? To Bly? (Why, then, not use "your" to refer to the Blys' house?) To himself as man and poet, or better, to the part of him that remains in the world while his poet's half turns its eyes toward alternate reality? Whatever the case, reading Wright's deeply personal, often emphatic, and wholly exposed commentaries on his own work, one gets the eerie feeling that Wright speaks directly to oneself. The communion is personal, conversational, and dialogic in the best sense of Bahktin's notion. One feels privy to a conversation overheard as if through a thin scrim of motel wall, and yet one feels also part of the dialogue, as if spoken to directly by a passionate, trusting friend. It's impossible to read these dialogics without appreciating Wright's emotional nakedness and his equally serious discipline of craft.

On the same draft, Wright reveals his own awareness of risks attending poems of Romantic or mystical reverie. Pointedly, he underscores his disdain for using natural beings as mere props to evoke trumped-up gestures masquerading as poetic trance. Next to the lines about the flicker, Wright scrawls in his characteristic, tightly knotted penmanship: "He is not 'poetic'—I saw him. He was very fine, very deliberate & thoughtful. He was not 'Nature,' he was just getting bugs out of that beautifully clean tree." Later on the same page, Wright divulges what most informed readers already suspect—that the horse appearing at the poem's close is none other than the Blys' horse David: "Still—I like it, I like it. David browsed with wonderful quiet dignity, in my shadow." There's a delightful giddiness in Wright's repeating "I like it," something almost childlike in its exuberance. Significant as well is Wright's subtle comma separating the fact of David's browsing from its location, as if the sight had given Wright pause too—and a vision of the shadow world's redemptive powers. That this world resides within himself, Wright learns, if only he looks away from temporal reality.

4 / *". . . some of the truth is agony. The only courage is joy."*

For Wright, joy was tenuous, beset always by bouts of depression and self-doubt. That self-doubt is familiar to most poets. Its very familiarity suggests one reason why so many poets love Wright's work, and also why so many fear it. On one end teeter-totters joy, on the other gloom. Worse yet, Wright's ecstatic flights do not always land him in the blissful country described earlier. Wright felt an obligation to be truthful about that discomfiting fact. In that regard, one other comment warrants noting, something scribbled on a draft of "In the Cold Chicken House," yet again on March 6, 1962.

Imagine what an electric late-winter day that must have been for Wright, secluded in the crudely furnished chicken house at the Blys' Minnesota farm. Reeling from his mystical encounter with the horse David, Wright sits at a rough desk surrounded by poems from his soon-to-be *Branch.* Surely he understands something is afoot with (or within) him, something aesthetic and yet personal. Something that would indelibly mark his writing as well as his private life. Some awareness, a Romantic might say "epiphany," so insistent he must write it down as if to give it body and thus reality. Here, he lays out his task in stark terms: "Okay, but I may as well tell the truth, and some of the truth is agony. The only courage is joy!"[26] For Wright, noth-

ing is harder won or more transient than joy. Smack dab in Auden's Age of Anxiety, in an era fitfully dismantling the last stones of the New Critical fortress, Wright, a poet not preternaturally given to abundance of happiness, labors on.

On October 5, 1962, just seven months after the joyful flight of "Arriving in the Country Again," Wright takes off for another "country." This time he travels by skiff not by horse. This time the bird is night, and it possesses only "one wing." This time he does not look away from the sun but has closed his eyes to it. Here's Wright's unpublished, handwritten draft of "Facing the Sun through Closed Eyelids," a breathtakingly moving poem that, until now, no one but Wright has seen:

Long ago I let the oars fall
And float off among the ripples.
They beached us here blind.
Then the night raised up
One wing, for a moment.
We can see, for a moment.
Where've you gone?
Whose country is this? I don't hear any trees.
Pebbles scrape at the hull,
Cold fingers
Tap at the prow.
All that time I lay dying,
I did not care, and now I am afraid
To lose you again.
I think I would just as soon
Ride the black skiff once more,
And get this thing over with, I think
I would just as soon.[27]

Whether in death or in the throes of despondent death-in-life, the speaker finds himself interred by the darkness of his own eyelids. What "we"—the speaker's body and spirit—see in blindness is the strange "country" of his own inner nothingness. Its shadows are not the redemptive kind that feed ecstatic life, that elsewhere animate even a horse to embody mystical union. Instead, these shadows populate the bailiwick of the dead. "Where've

you gone?" the speaker asks plaintively of his body, of the vivifying world he once saw with his own eyes. This poem floats a skiff of loneliness across Stygian waters. It bears loss, oarless and blind, holding only the haunting promise of greater loss "soon" to come. Even the poem's abrupt close—its repeated syntax halted in midphrase—hints at death's arrival, implying that things are indeed "over with."

Looking back at the books that follow *Branch* into print, one notable aspect of Wright's unpublished "Facing the Sun through Closed Eyelids" is the speaker's curious singling out of one item apparently missing from its strange locale: "I don't hear any trees." For Wright, trees frequently function as agents of transcendence, as the means of ecstatic flight from a ravaged personal and earthly locale. They figure for Wright a way to "get out." Scarred by strip mines and polluted by industrial factories, Wright's Ohio River Valley offers physical images of the damage rapacious, industrialized culture exacts upon the land—and upon the people who work those sites. In trees, as with horses and birds discussed earlier, Wright invests qualities of mystical transformation. With their roots firmly planted in dirt and their branches arching toward sky, trees manifestly live in two realms at once. Though earthly, trees hold the promise of the ethereal—or at least a promise of access to it. To climb a tree is to rise with it, to see beyond the horizon we grounded ones tread upon. To confirm the manner in which Wright links trees and ecstatic release, one need simply to adduce the opening of "Son of Judas":

The last time I prayed to escape from my body
You threw me down into a tangle of roots.
Out of them I clambered up to the elbows
Of a sycamore tree, in Ohio
. . . . . .
All I wanted was to do
Was get out.

Later in the poem, Wright identifies this tree as "Jenny sycamore," as well as "the one wing." Here, Jenny, the transcendent muse who blesses (and bedevils) much of his poetry, again appears alluringly just out of his human reach. Her "one wing" of transcendent flight counters night's melancholy "one wing" of Wright's earlier "Facing the Sun through Closed Eyelids." The

speaker's release into the sycamore's "one wing" this time offers ecstatic rising that looms both transcendent and sexual:

I rose out of my body so high into
That sycamore tree that it became
The only tree that ever loved me.

Wright's "A Secret Gratitude" also blends woman and tree—and again lends them marvelous transformational powers:

Think of that. Being alive with a girl
Who could turn into a laurel tree
Whenever she felt like it.
Think of that.

Not surprisingly, in keeping with his temperament, Wright weighs down these ecstatic reveries with ballast of nagging doubt. Frequently, that doubt shows itself in Wright's assumption that readers will react with incredulity to his recitations of mystical experience. Wright understands that poems of mystical flight require a change in readers' capacity for perception. In fact, in his essay on René Char, Wright asserts that the best if not "the only way to read" is to experience the "discomfort of having one's consciousness driven forward to wider inclusiveness" by the encounter.[28] After all, for such a poem to engage its readers, not only must the poet learn to see more and to see deeper, but so must his readers. That very argument Bertrand Russell uses to discredit the validity of ecstasy as a reliable path to truth. In his famous essay "Critique of Mysticism," Russell suggests that visionaries cannot behave as scientists do when they wish others to see what they have seen. While scientists simply "arrange their microscope or telescope" and thereby make changes in the "external world" to enable others to achieve expanded vision, the mystic has no lens to adjust for his readers. The poet, like the mystic, has no choice but to demand "changes in the observer."[29] Simply put, it's not enough for the poem to embody the ecstatic experience; the poem must also enact the ecstatic within readers willing and capable of altering their capacity for perception in like fashion. As a result, often in the very text of the poems themselves, Wright acknowledges his being vexed by the notion that, as William James laments, "no adequate report" of these encounters can be

given in words. In "Blue Teal's Mother," for example, Wright's frustration emerges rather baldly:

Why, look here, one night
When I was drunk,
A bulk tree got in my way.
Never mind what I thought when dawn broke.
In the dark, the night before,
I knew perfectly well I could have knocked
The bulk tree down.
Well, cut it up, anyway
. . . . . .

You may not believe this, but
It turned into a slender woman.
Stop nagging me. I know
What I just said.
It turned into a slender woman.[30]

What's more, Wright elsewhere concedes the occasional failure of transcendent agents to effect his ecstatic release. For instance, the speaker of "Confession to J. Edgar Hoover," who "last evening" in the city "sneaked down / To pray with a sick tree," admits that occasionally even trees cannot provide his escape: "In the mountains of the blast furnaces, / The trees turn their backs on me." Burdened by the city's "blast furnaces," neither these "sick" trees nor the speaker seems apt to wax ecstatic. Both reside imprisoned in Eliade's realm of the "profane," an industrial locale where the goal of the blast furnace is economic not spiritual growth. No wonder the sacred turns its back on them both.

Sometimes, however, it is Wright who turns his back on trees and refuses ecstatic communion. In the apostrophe "To a Blossoming Pear Tree," the speaker addresses a young tree, "[p]erfect, beyond my reach," and longs to tell it "[s]omething human." His story is one of forlorn isolation:

An old man
Appeared to me once
In the unendurable snow

. . . . . .

He paused on a street in Minneapolis
And stroked my face.
Give it to me, he begged.
I'll pay you anything.

A Romantic visionary, say, the mystical Wright, might well conjure any number of sappy transcendent images to mollify the man's desolation. Perhaps the pear tree could lift and embrace the old man among its tender young blossoms, or replace his shabby clothes with its lovely petals. Or, by mere virtue of its "trembling" beauty, simply banish the speaker's despair at a world that allows desperate aloneness. No such Disney-esque redemption arrives. Instead, the speaker rebukes the tree for being incapable of human moral compassion. Thus, the tree cannot possibly "[w]orry or bother or care" about someone so desperate for love that he's willing to "risk" police arrest or beating at the hands of some "cute young wiseacre" who'd kick him in the crotch "for the fun of it." Here, Wright's speaker may well have experienced an epiphany, one equal in startling ways to his earlier transcendent visions. However, this time what he sees prompts him to refuse ecstatic flight into another realm. Despite human loneliness and his cynical portrait of both police and American youth, this speaker, unlike the speaker of "A Blessing," does not yearn "to break / Into blossom" and thus escape. He sides with the faulted lot of us, grounded down here:

Young tree, unburdened
By anything but your beautiful natural blossoms
And dew, the dark
Blood in my body drags me
Down with my brother.

Wright's annoyance with the supposed ineffability of mystical experience also accounts for his peculiar midpoem addresses to his readers. A poet who fears that the limits of language will ultimately fail him—that he will bang up against the cage walls of language Ludwig Wittgenstein bemoans—might well turn to his reader and curtly remark: "I was a good child, / So I am / A good man. Put that / In your pipe." Robert Hass calls this "boozy insistence," and the gesture indeed evokes that familiar bloodshot clamor-

ing.[31] Yet we all know what underlies the drunk's all-knowing and embalmed obstinacy—fear and uncertainty. This same lingering, irritable doubt figures in Wright's stunning abuse of the reader in "Many of Our Waters: Variations on a Poem by a Black Child." Like the raucous, disruptive man who prances across the theater stage in Brecht's play, the irreverent one who breaks drama's spell by addressing the shocked audience, Wright's speaker, surely Wright himself, thumps his finger in the startled reader's chest:

If you do not care one way or another about
The preceding lines,
Please do not go on listening
On any account of mine.
Please leave the poem.
Thank you.

In daring readers to leave, Wright implicitly implores them not to. In breaking the poem's spell, Wright reveals not only his perilous desire to maintain its reverie but also the discomfiting reality that he can't. Perhaps this awareness undergirds Wright's notion of "the poetry of a grown man": poetry euphoric enough to seek the ecstatic and yet mature enough to admit its sobering limitations.

5 / *"I can / Scarcely believe it, and yet I have to, this is / The only life I have . . . "*

Wright's most memorable late poems demonstrate that "one wing" of joy and a ballast of doubt are sufficient to induce capricious but nonetheless exhilarating flight. In fact, dialogic argument with the self precedes a number of these poems onto the page. It's as if the poem itself represents the final flourish of a lively, sustained debate that we readers see only part of, merely the final yes/but. Many poems begin abruptly *in media res*, as if Wright draws a broad line across the page and starts his printed poem halfway into its spirited discussion. Here's the initial surge of "Northern Pike":

All right. Try this,
Then. Every body
I know and care for,

And every body
Else is going
To die in a loneliness
I can't imagine and a pain
I don't know.

However, the argument then twists like a curled fishhook. What ensues when the famished speaker and his friends eat the fish they've caught summons forth spiritual ecstasy:

We paused among the dark cattails and prayed
. . . . . .
We ate the fish.
There must be something very beautiful in my body,
I am so happy.

The poem inverts the Eucharistic gesture of "Arriving in the Country Again" in which the horse partakes of the speaker's "shadow." This time the speaker shares the fish's body and spiritual essence. The speaker becomes infused with the will-to-live and, more important, the will-to-live abundantly despite the certainty of death. In each case, the speaker discovers the ecstatic within him and internalizes its reverie, dramatically enriching, as James says, the "inner life." A similar revelation occurs in Wright's "Lightning Bugs Asleep in the Afternoon." Climbing up a railroad trestle, the speaker chances upon creatures who carry their own light brilliantly within them: "These long-suffering and affectionate shadows, / These fluttering jewels." Elevated by this encounter, the speaker comes down, literally and figuratively, from his intoxicated flight only to retain the radiance of ecstatic reverie within:

I think I am going to leave them folded
And sleeping in their slight gray wings.
I think I am going to climb back down
And open my eyes and shine.

In surprising ways, many late poems evince New Critical tension between opposing forces, a formidable struggle between competing notions. Blinded

by the otherworldly fireworks of Wright's ecstatic moments, readers often lose sight of this fundamental reality. Too often we remember the reverie of poems such as "Arriving in the Country Again" and conveniently forget the groundedness of, say, "To a Blossoming Pear Tree." If, as Wright himself contends, "The only courage is joy," he arrives in that "country" only through the dialogic interplay of reverie and insistent doubt. For Wright, to be joyful is courageous simply because so much in the world conspires against it.

This New Critical mode, the usual story goes, Wright tosses in the ash heap of aesthetic history sometime around his conversion to the "new" poetry characterized by *Branch:* lyrical, hop-headed affirmations of natural transcendence. However, if one looks back and, as Wright suggests, learns "to keep one's eyes open," one notices that this balance of opposing forces inheres even in poems one considers most ecstatic, for instance, "A Blessing." After all, the "break" that embodies the poem's ecstatic gesture amounts equally to an escape from the body and yet to the death of all that is human about it. To be a blossom is to be mystically transformed, but then whose hand writes the poem? And the next?

Wright's posthumous *This Journey* (1980) richly exhibits this dialogic. Its most moving poems of ecstatic experience convey also the speaker's awareness of the utter improbability of such notions. Not only does the speaker anticipate readers' doubts, but he also acknowledges his own. Remember, Wright openly labels himself "a jaded pastoralist" in one poem of this collection ("Notes of a Pastoralist"). Among the most openly dialogic poems is "A Reply to Matthew Arnold on my Fifth Day in Fano," which is just that—Wright's response to Arnold's "In Harmony with Nature." In *The Dialogic Imagination,* M. M. Bakhtin lovingly describes the dialogic exchange that makes a conversation occur not just between two people but also between two modes of thinking and being in the world. In such an interchange, every "concrete act of understanding is active" precisely because its value as a conversation is "indissolubly merged with the response" of the listener. In Bakhtin's view, the "encounter" is as much between two "subjective belief system[s]" as between two people, for the speaker's words dialogically engage the listener's attitudes, values, and ideologies.[32] For Wright, the poem is but one part of a larger conversation, his recurrent ontological debate on what it means to be human in a natural world. Implicitly, Wright also addresses the prickly issue of poetry's role in expressing that relationship. In short, Wright takes on Arnold's distrust of human and natural communion—as well as his

own misgivings expressed in "A Fit against the Country." Via the epigraph to Wright's poem, Arnold gets his first (and only) word in: "In harmony with Nature? Restless fool. . . . Nature and man can never be fast friends. . . ." Soon after, Wright admits that what he is about to do carries with it implicit risks: "Briefly in harmony with nature before I die, I welcome the old curse."

No longer a "blessing" but now a "curse," Wright's intimation of harmony with nature, seductive and insistent, arrives again. Late in his career and late in his brief life, Wright welcomes the familiar "curse" of the mystical once again. Though Arnold and his own New Critical mentors may call him a "fool," Wright opens his eyes and again encounters the ecstatic:

> A restless fool and fast friend to Fano, I have brought this wild chive flower down from a hill pasture. I offer it to the Adriatic. I am not about to claim that the sea does not care. It has its own way of receiving seeds, and today the sea may as well have a flowering one to float above it, and the Venetian navy underneath. Goodbye to the living place, and all I ask it to do is stay alive.

Through the simple ritual of tossing wild chive in the sea, Wright reconciles a world of apparent opposites and makes peace with them. What he does not understand, he can live with. What he cannot see (for example, the sunken Venetian navy), he trusts is there. What he cannot do—live forever—he asks this "living place" to do in his stead.

One can almost feel Wright casting aside the minister's black veil that had shielded him not so much from his readers' eyes but from his own. He looks himself in the face. He sees what he sees. Whom does he have to impress? Although Wright at this time does not know he has contracted cancer, he seems to have a prescience of his own death. In "A Winter Daybreak above Vence" the speaker, surely Wright himself, takes on this matter one last time. In the poem Wright assumes a passionate "dialogic relationship" with his "own utterance," something Bakhtin asserts is possible when a writer challenges his "own authorship" or divides it "in two."[33] With one "turn" of the head away from ordinary reality, Wright sees an ecstatic vision that his other, more doubting self enjoins him to refuse:

> *I turn, and somehow*
> *Impossibly hovering in the air over everything.*
> *The Mediterranean, nearer to the moon*

Than this mountain is,
Shines. A voice clearly
Tells me to snap out of it. Galway
Mutters out of the house and up the stone stairs
To start the motor. The moon and the stars
Suddenly flicker out, and the whole mountain
Appears, pale as a shell.

The "flicker" returns here not as mystical bird but as the passing of one light to another. The ordinary world mystically inverts. Moon and stars exchange their light with the Mediterranean, which shines "impossibly hovering in the air." Maybe it's Matthew Arnold, maybe it's Galway Kinnell, maybe it's the dialogic speaker's own disbelieving mind that cautions him to "snap out of it," but no matter. No voice can sway Wright from this epiphany.

Look, the sea has not fallen and broken
Our heads. How can I feel so warm
Here in the dead center of January? I can
Scarcely believe it, and yet I have to, this is
The only life I have. I get up from the stone.
My body mumbles something unseemly
And follows me. Now we are all sitting here strangely
On top of the sunlight.

Up down, hot cold, body spirit, stone and air. Everything "strangely" reconciles and rises as one. Is this not the most emphatic wish of so many of Wright's poems? Consider the body of work fleshed between Wright's "A Fit against the Country," the first poem in his first book, and his last collection's last poem, "A Winter Daybreak above Vence." The first poem's urge is to "disenchant and disintoxicate," to invite readers to be "glad" at being unceremoniously booted out of Edenic communion with nature. The second poem's impulse is to proffer nearly unbelievable ecstatic flight, body and spirit "impossibly hovering" and transcendent. In that dialogic we see traced opposing notions about the purpose and boundaries of poetry itself. Is poetry the ballast that keeps us grounded and thus human, eyes open to potential deceits of foolish reverie? Or is poetry the wing to lift us beyond mundane reality and thereby open our eyes to greater seeing, granting an

ecstatic peek into alternate reality? Conceivably, Wright came to fathom that poetry's greatest gift is to fuel both urges, the essential contradiction whose ineffable mystery reflects our best (and most disconcerting) human qualities. Whatever the case, Wright's poetry implicitly offers an answer. He retains belief in the gift of ecstatic reverie while not denying all that conspires against it. Yes, it is both blessing and curse. Yes, it carries him fitfully aloft on "one wing" of transcendent joy and grounds him with pestering doubt. Yes, he crashes down as often as he rises up. By measure of this distrust, Wright avoids the cloying zeal of the recently converted, the fresh believer who wants more than anything to make one believe as means to allay his own troubling doubts. In the great American tradition of the skeptic with a soft heart, Wright, like that tiny terra-cotta figure, looks into this world and then into that other one deep in shadow. There, just beyond the browsing horse, beyond trees awash in sunlight.

CHAPTER 3

Playing Favorites

American Poetry's Top Ten–ism Fetish

America worships top ten lists. Competitive to a fault, we Americans love to rank and to be ranked. Doing so confirms the value of our taste and the good taste of our values. Over time, top ten–ism has become our unconscious paean to solipsism fetishized on the merit of individual opinion. David Letterman's late-night bit aside, each of us has his/her top ten favorite painters, musicians, baseball players, movie stars, vacation hot spots, and restaurants. Newspapers and slick magazines love to publish these lists, making good advertising profits off the venture into personal hierarchies. Of late, the mania has become so narrowly focused one can open up, say, *Ski* magazine to pour over an Olympian's "Top Ten favorite Colorado hidden virgin powder runs." (Irresistible, the allure of list-making beckons my response, beginning with A-Basin's "East Wall," Breckenridge's "Way Out," the chutes below Loveland's "Patrol Bowl," Vail's "Blue Sky Basin," and so on . . .) A measure of one's sophistication and one's experience, such rankings are as seductive as they are intoxicating.

It should come as no big surprise, therefore, that the notion has spilled over into American poetry. Now poets give forth on the top ten books that "shaped" their art and perhaps catalyzed their lives. When I received an invitation to write about books "especially important" to my "development as a poet," the request seemed at first glance sensible and not the least bit thorny. Surely I could finger two hands' worth of books I loved and learned from. Even the coffee-table weekly *Newsweek* has initiated "A Life in Books" in its "Periscope" section, asking authors to name "My Five Most Important Books," thus edging halfway to a vaunted top ten. What's more, querying

writers for these lists is not at all uncommon. Like many, I've been asked to do so by students or friends eager to amass a list of must-read books. Riding the crest of this wave, there's now even a first book-length gathering of such poets' lists.[1] In palpable but also unsettling ways, that book's a good read.

That's precisely what pricked my attention when I was asked to offer up my own catalog. Pondering the ways such a list might be considered "a good read" became for me as important as composing the list itself. In the process, I learned something about writerly culture, as well as about what it means to be "shaped" by reading books.

Who Cares?

The positive spin on such lists doubtless involves poets' revelations of books that matter to them as writers who read. Really matter. At best, there's an unguarded vulnerability in opening the literary trench coat and showing one's intimate, private obsessions: the books one holds dear beyond all others. In an era seduced by irony and detachment, how refreshing to witness poets owning up to what they love and believe in. Finally, one stands up for passion, a particularly human if literary passion, and its capability to sharpen one's view of the world. If poets make these choices purely on the basis of personal likes and dislikes—on the basis of *taste,* that old-fashioned nugget of judgment—bless their literary hearts. They have escaped the current trend of bean-counting, cubby-holing, and theoretical-Balkanizing of our literature. More power to them.

These lists also offer insight into a poet's peculiar aesthetic. One may discover a poet's mode is in fact not so *peculiar* but is rooted rather in the poet's reading of and affection for A and B, or not X-Y-Z but P-Q-R. Aha, we say, so there's where that comes from! Suddenly we readers connect the dots fleshing out Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence. Or we see revealed at once the hidden-picture-elephant of literary history and this, for once, without having to cross our eyes. We reconsider Eliot's notion of a book's necessary and inescapable historical perspective, his view that books gain their truest meanings through their relationships to other books. We mull over Henry Louis Gates's remark in *Signifying Monkey* that all "texts Signify upon other texts, in motivated and unmotivated ways."[2] Who would deny the merit of pondering the nuanced permutations of authorial as well as textual influence?

Readers of such lists yearn for evidence of the poet's flashed epiphanic moment. Readers hanker for news of an epiphany engendered by encounters with a book, some ecstatic revelation catalyzed by the poet's dialogue with another writer's mind and heart, maybe even a dialogue with the soul they don't believe in but find themselves somehow wanting. Readers long for proof that such epiphanies are indeed possible, for this confirmation means ecstatic revelation awaits them in the next opened book. Honestly, most writers read only partly for pleasure. Instead, in the empty ore bucket of our hearts, we're mining for inspiration to purchase some higher plane for our own work. Might it be that hardbound by the bedside, patient but oh so potent, or that other, buried beneath back issues of *Sports Illustrated*? One's reading, and thus one's life, becomes rife with potential. It's the readerly version of Randall Jarrell's remark about writing poems being akin to standing around in the rain waiting to be hit by lightning. Readers, too, want to be hit by lightning. Readers turn the page, umbrella cinch-closed at their feet, awaiting the jagged crack-flash.

Epiphanicity, Peeping Toms, and Intellectual White Lies

In sum, I admire these favorite book lists' best intentions. I'll put my shoulder to the wheel of any vehicle that encourages more folks to read more books more often. Still, the manufacturing as well as the marketing of these lists carries with it blooms that wither under the noonday sun. These lists have a way of devolving to an odd flavor of Pop-40 hit list, the literary version of Casey Kasem's AM radio show slogging through the countdown.[3] Think of the way individual poems have come to be ranked in our culture. Fifteen years ago, William Harmon, sharing Kasem's penchant for numerical hierarchy, compiled a volume of what he called, straight-faced, *The Top 500 Poems*. Think of what it takes to make that short list! Consider, as well, the editor's fetish for pecking order: he indexed selected poems in "order of popularity," determined by *The Columbia Granger's® Index to Poetry*'s statistics on most-anthologized poems. The MPP (Most Popular Poem): William Blake's "The Tiger," followed by "Sir Patrick Spens" by Anonymous and Keats's "To Autumn." In addition to Harmon's *The Top 500 Poems,* there's also his own selection of *The Classic Hundred: All-Time Favorite Poems,* an even more exclusive A-list. Beyond Harmon's efforts, there's no shortage of anthologies keen to take on the task of selecting and rating our culture's "best" poems. See, for

example, Leslie Pockell's not-so-humbly-titled *The 100 Best Poems of All Time* (New York: Warner Books, 1992) or the estimable Harold Bloom's 1,008-page gathering, *The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer through Frost* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004).

Consider the manner in which our culture measures television shows' popularity, thus establishing their capitalistic value in advertising dollars. Poets' lists of favorite tomes amount to a Nielsen ratings system for the bookish. They offer means to graph authors' influences on others and thereby a way to establish their relative literary value.

That's one unwitting result of the aforementioned list book's editor having appended an indexed list of "The Most Frequently Listed Authors."[4] In short, this amounts to a way of quantifying, to coin a term, *epiphanicity*—an author's ability to "shape" another author's life and art. The uber-top ten list is, I suggest, a curiously American phenomenon, for it offers the essential mode to objectify the top ten of top ten listees. Yeah, Roethke may be good enough to have changed one poet's life and art, but look at the score O'Hara teleported to a new realm! In corollary fashion, readers scour these lists for names of authors and books they've already read, a way to confirm their fingers are on the pulse, their ears tuned to the right stations. Who doesn't yearn to confirm one's education, like that of Henry Adams, is on the right briared path? Who doesn't fancy this path leading, ineluctably, to some pristine meadow of pure knowledge?

Beyond that, it occurs to me such favorite-book lists sprawl deliciously before readers' eyes because they fulfill deep-seated voyeuristic tendencies. It's a bit like sneaking a furtive peep inside someone's underwear drawer. This time, the person's invited us in and propped open the drawer—thereby fueling the mind-blood rush even if there's no fear of getting caught in the act. Suddenly exposed to daylight's chill eye, all these so-privates can seem at once shabby and tired, surprisingly gothic, or tinseled enough to make us wish we'd see that one upon a body we'd never imagined being so electric. It's a form of intellectual window-peeping, a readerly peeping tom–ism made possible by our good sponsors. Please buy their products.

For the list-maker there's a concurrent and nearly insurmountable desire to fib. It's the intellectual's white lie. No doubt there's ego involved. One is tempted to cite a certain casserole of books simply because doing so guarantees one's good taste. One's book diet, of course, can make one look smart. And it's possible a book scanned if not wholly digested can still offer blazing

insight or inspiration. Who really knows how a book—like the cell's mitochondria—fuels the reader-writer's art? The writer's white lie might well be told in service of literary altruism. After all, submitting this list for public display means offering a cerebral model of what we might become if only we weren't so inclined to toss aside *Middlemarch* for the venal pleasures of *South Park*. Such lists become breathless tours akin to those of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,* trotting out the hallowed books like so many gold-plated sinks and tubs. "Oh," the list-reader is meant to sigh, "if only I . . ."

Aesthetic Fisticuffs, Red Wine, and LPs

Writers' usual discussions of their favorite books and authors invoke a vastly different scene. Its innocuous start involves dinner, a drink or two, and casual book chat. That calm discourse veers quickly into a chaos-symphony of screeching, table-banging, red-faced rants favoring one author over another held in abject, boundless disdain. It's a messy, bread-crumbed, wine-spilled, and refreshingly human interchange. And it reveals one's literary allegiances to be visceral. Yes, personal, rooted, and ultimately meaningful—but probably as peculiarly indefensible as one's devotion to the Cubs. What Cubs fan's ever accused of being rational?

Some of my most cherished graduate school memories revolve around these arguments in the beer-drenched kitchen, a gaggle of us hovering near the huge-bellied avocado refrigerator crammed with sale-priced, longneck Blatz. One poet pal argues spittingly for the preeminence of Wallace Stevens as America's Greatest Poet. Another puts forward his booted foot thumping William Carlos Williams as the Savior of American Verse. Part theater and part lecture hall, the scene drags on with no intermission or class bell to welcome-halt the vaudevillian action. Only one force is powerful enough to overcome such poetic bombast. Beneath the long night's coat, that force arrives in dribs and drabs, unnoticed amidst the stereo's blare and fluorescent's bent-back hum, creeping unseen like Poe's evil visitor in "The Masque of the Red Death." Then someone opens the refrigerator door, and out it leaps at the assembled debaters' dry throats. The refrigerator's empty. Then, a chorus of mumbling, handfuls of soggy chips, the pretzeled path to a screen door banging Bacchanalian detritus. Good nights, handshakes, sloppy kisses. Outside, the night sky reminds us how tiny our hands and our resumes.

Admittedly, mentioning the role of intoxicants in such scenes threatens to reduce them to mere middle-aged besottedness or to embarrassing juvenilia, a kind of writers' frat party aesthetic tussle. But my point is not what substance induces these interchanges, but rather the real substance of the interchanges.

These exchanges bleed raw and unguarded. These exchanges breathe writerly devotion to another's work, beliefs unchecked by ambition or reputation or even the likelihood of promotion to full professor. These are blue sky opinions, a storm having blown off the low-hanging gray. These opinions loom unclouded by calculation either careerist or egotistical.

Back in the day, as the kids say of old folks' nostalgia, nothing delighted us more than to wear the bombastic's cloak. It fit around my poet's neck as snugly as my high school football shoulder pads. Fitted with it and the plastic helmet of surety, I toted knowledge's pigskin into and through the arms of hulking dead figures named Jonson, Keats, Whitman, and Eliot. I'd trample the then-new Bly, Kinnell, Stafford, Merwin, even Wright, my own favorite All-American. It did not matter that Emily would not open her white house's front door or that Marianne would count my missteps as she would her line's syllabics. I wore the blustery uniform of the wrong-who-would-be-right. Who *must* be right or must retake the eight-hour qualifying exam. Sure, it was great fun, but those entering the fray were honing their chops for the boss's cocktail hour, for the classroom, for the essays we'd write, for the poems we'd pen in (sometimes unconscious) homage to our momentary favorites. Yes, often and unavoidably, momentary.

You see, looking over the published list of that poet pal who'd argued so eloquently and vehemently in favor of Stevens, on occasions numbering greater than my fingers and toes, I don't find Stevens.

That's the key limitation of such lists. They ask writers to imprison within an airless time capsule notions necessarily restless and changeling. This smacks of a fool's task. Nothing about one's art and one's relationship to other artists thrives for long if it's hermetically sealed.

Think of the times you've bought a new 45 at the record store, unsheathed a fresh LP, de-shrink-wrapped the brand-spanking compact disk, or downloaded cool tunes to your iPod. For you and those tunes, what a heady day, or week, or maybe a month. You played them incessantly, obsessively, and with full capitalist appreciation of the selfish value of consumption. For you, I, we are consumed by the music as much as we consume it. We eat and are eaten.

We're made full and made empty at once. Then, abruptly and without even casual warning, those beloved tunes strike the single, bland note Nothing Happens. Oh, the tunes play their beguiling songs outside us, but Nothing Happens inside us. We've tired of it, or so we complain. This lover's kiss no longer moves us. It is unworthy of us. Or is it we, the stark and suddenly insecure, who are unworthy of it? Are we incapable of hearing what once thrilled us in the needling, vein-lightning way a junkie needs his fix?

Past Tense and the Hardening of Literary Arteries

My favorite books are like that. Their junkie-high is fleeting, transitory, and fickle. Once I hungered for the book's next poem the way a cocaine addict craves his next line while snorting the super highway below his red nose. But wait, you may retort, our old favorites never really die, never fade away like the irrelevant old general Truman made of MacArthur. Those books hang with us, stores whose gifts we may no longer use but whose boxes still clutter the mental attic, waiting for us to need a Teflon-coated fondue fork to round out a dinner party or a poem.

Yes, like favorite musical albums, old favorite books remain with us and resurface in unexpected moments—flipping radio stations on a cross-country drive, gazing on a snowy moonlit night from the empty bedroom's window, holding one's firstborn in trembling, hospital-gowned arms. And it was good, as the Lord is said to have said after surveying creation, the Big Thing supposedly done. But as the world changed in ways even the Divine may not have imagined, so do we change. And with us, so change our tastes. What thrills us at this moment may have roots in some dendrite circuitry we long ago thickened and lengthened by dint of much rereading, much relistening. Still, what tickles that long thread, what bristles its wires and thus sprouts new branches, comes to us afresh. Is this not part, if not all, of what makes life achingly tragic and yet beautiful?

Likely, the fundamental problem attending the notion of "books that shaped one's art" lies in that phrase's moribund past tense. In sum, it's the exhaustion and finality inherent in the word "shaped." The implication here is that the evolution of one's art exhausts itself in one final death throe. It's as if the path of one's art should and must reach completion akin to a dead end. Kaput. From this point forward, there's no surprise, no discovery, no interrogation of one's impulses or anxieties. From this point on there's only

unknowing self-parody. One's *now* morphs into one's *always,* a curious state of suspended animation. The result is a poet-zombie, doomed to wander stiff-legged to and from the writer's desk, trapped in the most unpoetic death-in-life one might imagine (or justifiably fear). One's a star, all right, having earned the lead role in a B-feature, "Long Night of the Living-Dead Poet."

This observation lies at the core of F. Scott Fitzgerald's complaint about his once-pal and always-literary-competitor Ernest Hemingway. Fitzgerald, fresh from a string of his risky and oft-failed literary ventures, is said to have grumbled that Hemingway had found a good thing and never left it. Old Ernest, Scotty protested, had calcified rather than continued to stretch, to reach, to risk. Who wishes to be the writer known for the hardening of one's literary arteries? To accept one's art as fully "shaped" is to pitifully wither, not unlike the aged of our population who grow smaller with time and gravity. Perhaps, like aging itself, that process is intractable and fundamentally unavoidable. Still, the struggle to escape the stultification of one's body of work—like the labor of running 5Ks, pumping iron, grunting one's sit-ups—infuses energy and verve. Perhaps doing so, thus keeping oneself open to aesthetic possibilities, delays the inevitable.

At best, the notion of cataloging books that "shaped" one's art can finger a single, definitive point in time when a handful of books underwrote—both figuratively and literally—what one was doing then. A particular *then.* Don't be misled. That sort of favorite-books list warrants updating at regular intervals, if not every year then every five years, every ten. In fact, that might be the most meaningful and revelatory list to keep: a *List of Lists.* Its constancies and its changes might well map one's evolution as poet and person, as citizen of art and society. Surely a few books and authors would reappear in list after list, perhaps with years of absence intervening. Those living authors themselves would likely have undergone personal aesthetic evolutions, and the metamorphosis of their art would just as likely reflect the list-keeper's own transformations via the texture of choices. What beauty simply did not look so good to one at age twenty may indeed appear wholly appealing at age sixty-five, a corollary notion applying as well to one's beloved, as my father confided to me on his seventieth birthday. As we change so change the eyes with which we come to see Seeing. Equally, some authors, like forgotten rock bands, we come to see as bookshelf one-hit wonders. Is not one's art, as well as one's taste for others' art, the product of a similar Cuisinarting of beauty and experience?

Such notion gives credence to the belief that both one's life in art and the life in one's art reside perpetually in Heraclitean flux. It is the changeling's face that is our face, no matter what the mirror shows. It's the idea embodied in one's art and life, in the tug of war between constancy and transition, that typifies one's body of work. What's more, this necessary fluidity is something James Wright himself was keenly aware of, so much he could proclaim a poet's highest obligation as the duty to seek a "furious and unceasing growth."

What poet-zombie would court the hardening of literary arteries? Ah, but there's the rub. Can writers really map their own evolutions? Doesn't doing so risk the native mystery of a life in art? Doesn't it tempt the fates we superstitious writers kneel to? Doesn't it make public one's private, guarded, half-voiced, and often timorous dialogues with the self—the mélange of bluster and doubt we see in Robert Frost's recently released notebooks, musings that this contriving, "least innocent" American poet knew enough to keep to himself?[5] Should one air such folly in the fresh soy ink of print?

No matter. As a writer, it's likely beyond one's abilities and moreover beyond one's consciousness to assess reliably how one's work has evolved, or failed to, over time. It may well be no one's task. If not, it's more properly the province of the critic, whose literary eye and ear ought to aspire to objectivity not privy the artist, even the most self-conscious artist. Where are you, critic of goodwill?

My List of Lists

If one can neither reliably nor objectively evaluate one's own work, perhaps one can, using an expanded version of the "poet's bookshelf" method, map out the avenue of one's literary tastes. The real source of my unease with the notion of a favorite-books list is not that one might reasonably compile such a list, but rather that a *single* list can be assumed to have "shaped" one's aesthetic once and forever. Why not, then, compose a series of lists over time? In the process, one can examine just how stable has been one's own stable of top ten favorite books over the years. Having hypothesized a life-giving, regenerative force inherent in Wright's notion of "furious and unceasing growth," I ought to scrutinize how my favorites reflect or dispute this assumption. In that spirit, I humbly offer my own List of Lists, a summary of the top ten books that "shaped" my art at the milestone ages of thirty, forty, and fifty.

FAVORITES @ AGE THIRTY

James Wright, *The Branch Will Not Break* and *Amenities of Stone* (the latter his 1961–62 volume Wright himself suppressed from Wesleyan UP publication)
Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*
Rilke, *The Duino Elegies*
William Stafford, *Traveling through the Dark*
Galway Kinnell, *The Book of Nightmares*
Ed Dorn, *Gunslinger*
Cesar Vallejo, *Twenty Poems of Cesar Vallego,* trans. John Knoepfle, James Wright, and Robert Bly
William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*
Richard Hugo, *The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir*
Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*

This widely various list shows that I, like many young poets, was beset by aesthetic schizophrenia. A poet afflicted with multiple personalities, I some days wore the lyric poet's feathered boa, other days the storyteller's weathered trench coat. At first, I wished to be Rilke. Like prewashed jeans, Rilke's rich lyricism and philosophical musings I tried on for size during long afternoons in the library, bookstore, coffeehouse, and forest. Each time, they looked better on him than on me. I bought them anyway, slowly accumulating a closet full of ambitious but failed lyrics. From Rilke, I learned what I could not do. And I discovered as well that one learns much from what one finally refuses.

That was the way it was for me and Olson's poems, his esoteric projective verse, his splaying poems around the page and laboring to strangle what he called the "lyrical interference of the I." What I loved of Olson was what, in the end, he worked to silence—say, just the sort of personal invocation that opens "Maximus, to himself":

I have had to learn the simplest things
last. Which made for difficulties.[6]

Still, what Olson, Ed Dorn, and even Paul Metcalf offered was a hip insistence on others' history—and a way to effect within their poems what current hip-hop artists do so well. Back then, these guys sampled texts, not

songs, stealing from nearly forgotten historical sources and layering their own musings within the multitrack mix their poems became.

In real ways, these guys sprang from Williams. There was insistence on the American idiom and on the physical thing, the image unaccompanied by the filigree of high-falutin' rhetoric. A poet of the flowerpot, a wheelbarrow, a ball game crowd. A way to say most with least.

Some of the major figures of the day—Hugo, Stafford, Kinnell, and Wright—proffered an alternative to the fifties mainstream's staid, constipated, New Critical poetry. And Wright offered a Midwestern voice whose subjects were both worldly and otherworldly, scenes situated both in the fields and factories I recognized from my Midwestern youth and also in the hazy, beguiling alternate reality of Deep Image poetics. The latter Wright had gleaned from Cesar Vallejo and a score of others he'd translated or read in translation: Georg Trakl, Neruda, Juan Ramon Jimenez, Goethe, and more. Wright fashioned natural beings as emissaries of the other world, an alternate reality abounding with redemptive possibility sadly ravaged by the era's industrial betrayal. In many of these poems there seemed to be no identifiable speaker, some, such as "In Fear of Harvests," lacking personal pronouns in their headlong dash to expanded consciousness:

It has happened
Before: nearby,
The nostrils of slow horses
Breathe evenly,
And the brown bees drag their high garlands,
Heavily,
Toward hives of snow.[7]

One can hear Wright tossing aside—momentarily, as we've already seen—the mantle of erudition and classical control he'd struggled to achieve in his first two collections. By dint of turmoil and self-interrogation, Wright made his home in the hurricane eye of the self-same "furious and unceasing growth" he admired in other writers.

FAVORITES @ AGE FORTY

Frank O'Hara, *Lunch Poems*
Philip Levine, *A Walk with Tom Jefferson*

Robert Lowell, *History*
Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse*
M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*
Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*
Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*
C. K. Williams, *Selected Poems*
Robert Penn Warren, *Brother to Dragons*
Anne Bradstreet, *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*
James Wright, *The Branch Will Not Break*

How lucky I was to come to O'Hara relatively late, say, in my mid-thirties. If I'd drunk from his cup as a wayward youth, I might never have sipped from any other. O'Hara's intoxicating mixture of iconoclasm and reverence, his hipness, the tight-jeans quality of his syntax, that spring of surprise and giddiness makes him an American original. Poke an eenie-meanie finger just about anywhere in O'Hara's *Lunch Poems,* say, "The Day Lady Died," and ask how many poets of the 1950s could get away with this?

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun
and have a hamburger and a malted and buy
an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets
in Ghana are doing these days.[8]

To be sure, O'Hara's awareness of the intersection of private and public history animates his verse in unexpected ways. It's one reason his pop-cultural references resonant beyond his personal milieu while retaining their essential, life-giving private value.

Private value. It's here that O'Hara and Bradstreet serve as useful counterpoints on this, my midlife list of poets for whom public history butters their bread. Bradstreet felt herself wholly outside of large-scale history, a woman relegated to home and hearth, husband and family. And a woman subject to the rulings of men, both churchly and worldly. She never imagined her writing worthy of anything other than scorn. At least that's the party line she spewed in verse and in public, using that stick to subtly skewer the patriarchal order she supposedly acknowledged as her betters. To come to readers' attention, Bradstreet the poet essentially had to be outed. Without her knowledge, Bradstreet's brother-in-law snuck her manuscript away to England to

be printed. Once in print, Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse* became the first book published by a citizen of the New World, an auspicious if wholly unforeseen dawn for American poetry. Of Bradstreet I love most her choice of subjects, how the narrow circumference of her realm still admits of great emotional expansiveness. I love her affection for homespun metaphors, those things she knows as well as her own hands' blisters, the likelihood of death in childbirth, the tall one's freckles and the dark-haired youngest. I love her veiled admission of religious doubt in an era brooking only surety.

Likewise, Levine speaks for those who have no voice, Lowell finally finds a subject larger than himself, and Warren conflates poetic and historical truth into one. C. K. Williams lurches sometimes in anger and other times in bliss into confrontations with what should not be said in the polite company of bowdlerized history, his poems' long lines embracing the minutiae and the iconic with equal relish. His fondness for detail risks his readers' patience—a big writerly risk—and rewards them for staying the course. I tried my hand at nearly all the politically risky and sexually provocative modes one finds in these poets' works, especially those found in Williams's collection *Tar.*

In Bakhtin, Gadamer, and White one finds ways to configure as well as to express the fundamental dialogue between the individual utterance and the historical voice. Their best gifts? That what we say now remains in essential dialogic relationship to all preceding similar utterances. That one's historical horizon both limits and empowers one's understanding of historicity. That history is a made thing, constructed with plot and narrative and dialogue as one would scaffold any novel.

Against the dark night of the soul, Heidegger gives forth on the role of the poet in a desperate time like this one. And Wright, again, offering up his book that pockets my heart. Or is it my head?

FAVORITES @ AGE FIFTY

James Wright, *To a Blossoming Pear Tree*
Frank O'Hara, *Collected Poems*
William Carlos Williams, *Journey to Love*
Vassily Kandinksy, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*
Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*
Stephen Crane, *The Poems of Stephen Crane*
Kenneth Koch, *New Addresses*
M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*

William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*
A Score of My Contemporaries' Books

Perhaps because I am getting old wearing the slow motion self-denial and dread most baby boomers afflict upon themselves and their world, I've become fond of poems written toward the end of a poet's life. William Carlos Williams's late poems offer a seldom-found maturity of mind given voice. The Modernist pyrotechnics have long since faded. There's only a man dealing with the night's coming end, nothing ablaze but a mind fired by what glows dimly beneath the dark shawl of midnight. Here is a thinking man reflecting on the nature of emotion, on the role of love and marriage, on his place among artists here and gone. The allure is not what I loved earlier, *Spring and All*'s terse rhetoric leaving me to intuit a carrot leaf's or wheelbarrow's imagistic import. Here, instead, Williams gives the careful, syntactical pitch needed to sing thought outright, as in "The Ivy Crown," "The Sparrow," "Tribute to Painters," "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower," and here in the brilliant but overlooked "The Pink Locust":

I'm persistent as the pink locust,
once admitted
to the garden,
you will not easily get rid of it.
Tear it from the ground,
if one hair-thin rootlet
remain
it will come again.
It is
flattering to think of myself
so. It is also
laughable.
A modest flower,
resembling a pink sweet-pea,
you cannot help
but admire it
until its habits
become known.
Are we not most of us
like that?[9]

Likely it's that quality of thought I'm drawn to in others on this list. James, for instance, poses an admirable figure for his classic study of ecstatic experience in cultures and religions across the globe. What makes this study even more remarkable is James's own confession that he himself was "incapable" of such ecstatic flights, whether pagan or Christian. Still, James yearned to learn more of others' experiences with an alternate reality that stubbornly would not admit him. Earlier, Kandinsky's venerable book examines in meticulous detail the evocative powers of color, line, and shape. In each, Kandinsky points to art's ascendant qualities and its hand in freeing what he calls an artist's devotion to an "inner necessity."[10] Just two years before the start of World War I, facing the coming horror that exposed humans' capability for mass and anonymous destruction of their fellows, Kandinsky spoke out in favor of the spirit, an unchurched and apolitical spirit artists both discover within themselves and enliven within others: "The spirit, like the body, can be strengthened and developed by frequent exercise: just as the body, if neglected, grows weak and finally impotent, so the spirit perishes if untended."[11] What great human if not artistic despair Kandinsky must have felt witnessing World War I and then again, years later, fleeing the closing of the Bauhaus and the coming Nazi tempest. Likewise, to Benjamin one turns to think about thinking about art, to risk the foolish and the sacred in the same deliberation. One thinks about art not simply in an "age of mechanical reproduction," as Benjamin saw it in his day, but now in our blessedly cursed era of digital reproduction.

Against that ponderous pondering, again there's O'Hara, but now the full range of his work, the spots where silliness overwhelms the despair of modern living's "Jumble Shop" and discovers something momentarily rich. Kenneth Koch's wonderful *New Addresses* appears for its similar blend of whimsy and reflection. That's what animates his collection of apostrophes addressed to things as various as piano lessons, marijuana, the decade of his twenties, and his old street "addresses." Koch takes the venerable if shopworn form and refurbishes it with postmodern irony and his characteristic joyfulness. This joyfulness one is not likely to find in Stephen Crane, the first real Modern American poet, a poet both symbolist and philosophical. Much like Rilke, Crane reminds me of what I'm not good at, a lesson in itself. And batting clean-up, there's Wright, this time without the Deep Imagist sleight of hand. In *To a Blossoming Pear Tree,* Wright returns to his emblematic quest for the ecstatic but chooses to keep his feet on the ground. Time and again

he refuses the pull of the other world in favor of this flawed one. Here's the closer of Wright's "Hook," a poem plangent with knowledge of both human loneliness and communion:

Did you ever feel a man hold
Sixty-five cents
In a hook,
And place it
Gently
In your freezing hand?

I took it.
It wasn't the money I needed.
But I took it.[12]

Poets turn to writing poetry and readers to reading it for reasons similar to Wright's speaker. It's certainly not for the money. It's something closer to solace and communion, joy and revelation, some sustaining reason to click off the TV. That's why, last among my Favorites @ Age Fifty, comes a score of contemporaries whose works have sustained me as we've gotten older. They number a dozen or so, poets whose voices have both delighted and instructed me as we've set out upon the writers' sea alone and yet together. To name them is impossibly fraught with peril, not the least of which is having enough space to do them all justice. Suffice it to say most poets of the same generation have a cadre of peers they feel communion with, a sense of being in the same leaky boat gifted with splintered paddle and bailing bucket. The magic comes from seeing what various things each has made of these shared circumstances and tools. Now I await their new books with the same feverish heat I once anticipated my favorite band's new album.

Reading the Remains upon a Shelf

If this is what it means to be "shaped" by reading books, then call me wet clay. Whatever strange figure these books make of us, whatever garish creature we become when fired in the kiln of reading and ruminating, we are not finished product. Each day brings new clay, malleable in these books' hands and in our clumsy own. More books and more daybreaks will make of us

something similar but different come next week, come next year, and come, with fanfare whose acronym we can't predict, yet another decade. In time, among the paperbacks and clothbounds, our poet's bookshelf accumulates a motley assortment of figures we became, once were, and will always partly be. There's the curve of flushed cheek, the lopsided ears, an oft-broken super-glued nose—these constancies amidst all the goings and fallings away. If we are, as the saying goes, what we eat, we are equally what we read. And reread. And thus rewrite as we write, writing anew. Look at your own writer's bookshelf. Study your own face and all the disguises you've forged by reading and writing, forged by living a life reading and writing. Who will give pause when that inevitable black-robed and -hooded figure scythes the shelf clean of these figures, our assorted temporal selves? When only books—our best portrait—linger in the silent chorus of dust?

CHAPTER 4

"When the Frost Is on the Punkin"

Newspaper Poetry's History and Decline

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

—WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS,
from "Asphodel, that Greeny Flower"

Once upon a time in America, dear reader, the blissful coupling of one's breakfast coffee and newspaper offered as well the complementary pleasures of poetry. There, among the political bickering, assorted heinous crimes, and our great-great-grandparents' obituaries, appeared a poem in nearly every American newspaper. Many poets used this forum to establish their poetic credentials. Typical of them, the Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley forged his literary career by publishing poems in nineteenth-century country-bumpkin newspapers, over time attracting local, state, and eventual national attention for his homespun verses.

To our jaded postmodern sensibilities, the fabled partnership of poetry and the newspapers perhaps smacks as quaint as television's Big Three networks' nightly news. Both reflect past-tense modes of delivery and reception. Newspapers' not-so-loyal readership continues to spiral precipitously downward. Now, in fact, less than half of American households receive a daily newspaper, with weekday circulation at several hundred newspapers reporting to the Audit Bureau of Circulations free-falling 10.6 percent for the six months ending September 30, 2009, when compared with the year-earlier

period. Sunday circulation plummeted 7.5 percent.[1] The newspapers' public allure has lost its gloss.

Despite this daunting reality, a movement is presently afoot to reintegrate poetry into our nation's newspapers. The push is partly funded by a well-heeled poetry foundation and energized by a small cadre of well-meaning newspaper journalists. Ted Kooser, former U.S. poet laureate, is also involved in the venture. To the skeptical, however, this movement would appear foredoomed. After all, in the midst of the digital age, these folks aspire to blend an arguably overlooked art form with an apparently outdated mode of delivery. Because this renewed effort is nascent, it's thorny to predict what will come of the movement in the long run. What's most helpful now is to offer some context for the sheer audacity of their current effort. To do so, let's examine historical factors supporting the newspaper-poetry partnership and reasons underlying its eventual decline.

1 / Back in the Day

Post–Civil War America enjoyed a bounty of frenetic activity altering the nation's industrial and social fabric in ways unexpected but largely unstoppable. Samuel Clemens opined that the Civil War "uprooted institutions that were centuries old, changed the politics of the people, transformed the social life of half the country, and wrought so profoundly the national character that the influence cannot be measured." Undeniably, the war's industrial engine accelerated the development of new and life-changing innovations. Within a few years, the nation saw the 1869 completion of the transcontinental railroad, easing travel among the country's distant and distinct regions. Between 1872 and 1874, whites decimated the Great Plains bison herds, depriving many Native American tribes of life-giving material and ritual support. That annihilation, and a flurry of subsequent violent confrontations between natives and whites, ended with the establishment of the reservation system to isolate Native Americans in unwanted areas, clearing the Plains for Europeans moving west across vast flatlands to the Rockies. In 1876 Bell invented the telephone, and three years later Edison introduced the lightbulb—means to communicate among as well as to (en)lighten our cities and their citizens. The haughty—and for Native Americans, often fatal—notion of Manifest Destiny experienced surprising renewal of its prewar status, feeding an escalating sense of nationhood.

With this awareness of nationhood came a corollary interest in the manners and customs of our nation's disparate locales. The Civil War had fostered this interest in our unity-through-diversity, as the war had mingled soldiers from all parts of the country and thus had increased recognition of peculiar dialects, traditions, and affectations. From this awareness sprang Local Color, an offshoot of regional realism focusing on the speech, attitudes, and values of various parts of the country. Clemens himself got his start as a newspaperman offering local-color glimpses of Western gold rush towns and his later studies of the Mississippi River states. In addition, Joel Chandler Harris and George Washington Cable offered Southern vignettes, Sarah Orne Jewett portrayed the rural Northeast, Bret Harte struck portraits of California gamblers and miners, and in Indiana James Whitcomb Riley conjured up picturesque Hoosier legends as well as rollicking verse.

This content fueled the Great Age of Newspapers and Magazines. In fact, these mediums possessed monopolistic control of the reading public, exacting their reign well before radio broadcasting, television, cell phones, and the Internet. Adding to their domination of the public's attention, these venues were not forced to compete with the sports mania currently aflutter in America, as the first professional baseball team, the Cincinnati Reds, had just begun play in 1869. A broad reading public, particularly among educated Easterners, hankered for sketches portraying the hinterland's rube's theater. And those in the hinterlands wished to see themselves reflected in verse and commentary, if only to validate their own humble ways. Consequently, big-city newspapers sent correspondents to scour the land for what was then deemed exotic, and local newspapers hired poets to versify the homely customs of the rabble. As much of the readership was female, a common theme developed to satisfy the delicate sensibilities of this burgeoning audience. Based on the notion that art ought to provide readers with a feeling of moral uplift, literature was viewed equally as entertainment and as means of ethical betterment.

Into this lackluster realm trod James Whitcomb Riley, a figure who serves as my Every-Poet-of-the-Newspaper-Age. An itinerant sign painter and performer in Dr. S. B. McCrillus's medicine show, Riley had his roots firmly in performativity. In McCrillus's traveling medicine show, Riley performed as part of a trio touting the benefits of "McCrillus European Balsam." He sang, penned a few sharp verses, and painted the good doctor's advertising signs until he tired of this peripatetic life. In 1877 Riley landed in Anderson, Indiana,

my hometown. It seemed a decent place to ply his newly chosen newspaperman's trade for the *Anderson Democrat.* Introducing himself to readers, Riley described his new role as poet "constantly on hand" to do whatever versifying the editors might see fit for him. He earned forty dollars a month in return for, Riley said, "making my salaam to the Anderson public."

Riley's verses sparked immediate public interest in the backwater town along the White River northeast of Indianapolis. Within a month, the blond poet had breathed a veritable poetic hurricane among the citizenry, so much so the circulation of the *Democrat* doubled in that time span. As a result, his salary was promptly raised to the kingly sum of sixty dollars per month. What kind of verse, one may ask, occasioned such poetic fervor among the masses? Of Riley's thirty-nine poems published in the 1877 pages of the *Democrat* and seventeen more appearing there in 1878, his topics included the usual elegy for a dead child; various character studies of local types such as "Maud Muller" and "Wash Lowry"; his salute to a sovereign frog; and a weirdly Kiplingesque poem that chimes its way through an impenetrable tale recounting the mythical land of "Crankadox," "Gryxabodill," and the "Queen of the Wunks." Seeding locals' affection for Riley's writing was his focus on dialect and place, his version of Local Color Indiana-style, as evidenced by this excerpt from the long narrative monologue "George Mullen's Confession":

> *And the cutest little baby—little Grace—I see her now*
> *A-standin' on the pig-pen as her mother milked the cow—*
> *And I can hear her shouting—as I stood unloading straw,—*
> *"I'm ain't as big as papa, but I'm biggerest'n ma."*

Despite his regional success and his feverish writing while holed up in a tiny apartment on Anderson's Main Street, Riley couldn't crack the gates of the East Coast editors, portals to national fame. William Dean Howell's *Atlantic Monthly* and also *Scribner's* repeatedly turned a three-piece-suited cold shoulder to the Hoosier poet. Desperate, Riley resorted to sending poems to the day's poetic Apollo, William Wadsworth Longfellow, who responded with a brief but favorable note saying Riley's work showed "the true poetic faculty and insight."[2] Emboldened, Riley sent new work to *Scribner's,* quoting Longfellow's letter in a marketing ploy reminiscent of Whitman's baldly quoting Emerson's note on *Leaves of Grass.* Not surprisingly, that piece—

accompanied by Riley's own sketchings—shuttled back unwanted. Word of his failures with the East Coast crowd spread to rival editors in Anderson. Relentlessly, one newspaper editor, a gentleman named Kinnard, goaded Riley that he simply lacked talent. On a humid July evening, amid the typical Midwestern sauna when one's wet shirt clings bodily like a second layer of skin, a heated argument ensued between the two outside the Anderson Hotel. Riley argued vociferously that reputation not talent nudged open the literary door among the East Coast dandies. In response, Kinnard accused Riley of being, among other niceties, a sore-headed loser. The next day Riley came up with an idea to prove his point.

James Whitcomb Riley's writerly start arrived via the Anderson Democrat, *which over the years morphed into the* Anderson Daily Bulletin. *During summer months my schoolmate Jerry Lippmann attended Boy Scout Camp. In his place I carried the neighborhood's* Bulletin *route, a newspaper of the old days before afternoon papers deathbed-printed their last words. Though I didn't know, carrying the* Bulletin *linked me to Riley, the Hoosier poet. In 1882, just years after a drunken and dejected Riley departed Anderson, the house I lived in as a child was built on West Fifth Street. Solid if unpretentious, the house stood literally on the wrong side of the railroad tracks, surrounded by the dilapidated houses of the working class who cared not much for yard work or home upkeep. With a dollar in pocket, I'd ride my gold Schwinn three blocks to Eighth and Morton to the corner barbershop. A bronze plaque on the side of the building indicated the spot once held the home of Riley's good friend Will Ethell (one of the fellows who'd helped to perpetrate the hoax Riley plotted in 1878). Riley had spent many summer evenings lounging with pals on the very spot I got my fresh buzz cut, leaving some bangs for effect. Once I asked my parents who the heck James Whitcomb Riley was. In response, my father recited from memory a verse of two from "When the Frost Is on the Punkin," a literary feat that left me meagerly impressed. Later, I was genuinely awed when my father, unaware I was in the adjacent room, recited for my mother a ribald version of Riley's poem, beginning with, "When the frost is on the punkin, it's time for dickie dunkin."*

The plan was as simple as it was daring. Riley would fashion a knock-off of Edgar Allan Poe and pawn it to the reading public as a recently found, unpub-

lished work by the dead poet. When the piece received critical praise, Riley's case would be made. Riley's "Leonainie" appeared on August 2, 1877, in the *Dispatch,* a Kokomo, Indiana, newspaper edited by a man in on the hoax. It was printed under the heading: "A Hitherto Unpublished Poem of the Late Lamented Edgar Allan Poe." To provide cover, one of Riley's ex-medicine-show-local-sign-painter pals, Will Ethell, found a facsimile of Poe's "The Bells" and, approximating Poe's handwriting as best he could, set out to copy Riley's "Leonainie" onto the flyleaf of an old Ainsworth dictionary. If anyone asked to see the original, the Ainsworth would then be trotted out as evidence. Here's Riley's faux-Poe:

Leonainie—Angels named her;
And they took the light
Of the laughing stars and framed her
In a smile of white;
And they made her hair of gloomy
Midnight, and her eyes of bloomy
Moonshine, and they brought her to me
In the solemn night.—

In a solemn night of summer,
When my heart of gloom
Blossomed up to greet the comer
Like a rose in bloom;
All forebodings that distressed me
I forgot as Joy caressed me—
(Lying Joy! that caught and pressed me
In the arms of doom!).

Only spake the little lisper
In the Angel-tongue;
Yet I, listening, heard her whisper,—
"Songs are only sung
Here below that they may grieve you—
Tales but told to deceive you,—
So must Leonainie leave you
While her love is young."

Then God smiled and it was morning.
Matchless and supreme
Heaven's glory seemed adorning
Earth with its esteem:
Every heart but mine seemed gifted
With the voice of prayer, and lifted
Where my Leonainie drifted
From me like a dream.[3]

Riley's Poe knockoff fairly bristles with Poe's peculiar affectations. There's a deluge of dripping melancholy, a tub-thumping rhyme scheme, a gaggle of angels delivering their beautiful gift in the night, and a beloved bestowed but just as quickly stolen away. Oh, both poet and reader lament, earthly songs merely grieve us and tales deceive us to no end! The latter may well have been Riley's hidden clue, for his concocted "tale" of Poe's lost poem deceived the citizenry both far and wide. Assuredly, the scheme hoodwinked editor Kinnard, who with great fanfare reprinted "Leonainie" in his *Anderson Herald* and with puffed chest declared, "We look for an exhausting and damning criticism from Riley, who will doubtless fail to see 'Leonainie's' apocryphal merit, and discover its obvious faults."

Kinnard did not wait long for Riley's printed assessment of his own faux-Poe. That, of course, was part of the scam. Riley praised the poem for exhibiting Poe's "peculiar bent of thought" and his ability to blend the "beautiful" and the "repulsive," but he also poked fun at (his own disguised) lines for showing bland diction and "mediocre" versification. In the end, Riley concluded he lacked the "temerity" to claim Poe as author and yet could not deny that possibility, cautioning Kinnard that the editor is not "wholly impervious to the wiles of deception." Indeed. Kinnard was not the only one seduced by the hoax. A slew of national newspapers swept up the story, notably including the *New York World, Tribune,* and *Post.* Some were enticed, others merely wary. But the poem instigated enough literary ruckus to arouse well-known Poe biographer William F. Gill of Boston, who petitioned to review the original and verify its authenticity. Gill suggested his depositing a large sum at a Boston bank as security so the Ainsworth containing the poem—a forgery just completed by Riley's pal Ethell—might be shipped to him for study.

Riley Grade School was built in Anderson, Indiana, in 1915. At a cost of forty thousand dollars, the brick school raised on the corner of Eighth and Madison Streets housed 245 pupils. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, many of my boyhood pals attended Riley School, about ten blocks from my home. Instead, I endured the metal-edged rulers wielded by Sisters of the Holy Cross at St. Mary's School. My own brush with Riley School, impelled by a few inflammatory photographs, incited some flames of its own—neither of which would've pleased the genteel poet. Once, walking home from my girlfriend's house tethered to the high hills of the upper crust, I stumbled on a Catholic schoolmate and his freckled brother. With hushed voices, they conveyed a plan for action they sold as necessary and good. Their thumbing of girly mags had fed a need for primordial release. Theirs was not the usual masturbation. They aspired instead to something hotter: to heave Molotov cocktails into the Seventh Day Adventist church's empty parking lot, getting off on the fire, the sirens, and the fire engine's red bulk. Tossing the Molotovs carried not an ounce of religious or political import, Catholic though we were. Our statement shouted boredom—dumb guys made dumber by pictured naked girls. Something had to explode. When I lit and tossed the Molotov, I stood flat-footed to relish the fireball erupt on black asphalt. The view rose flushed and pleasurable, though brief as sex. Then I sprinted through the Riley School playground, past the building's brick facade made orange in the fiery glow. It was October, and kids' paper pumpkins adorned schoolroom windows, beneath a banner quoting Riley's "When the Frost Is on the Punkin." Flames reflected in the window glass rose from their cut-out eyes and toothless grins. The pumpkins appeared cute in a kidsy way. I seemed suddenly too old for that. My feet skid-kissed loose gravel as I ran serpentine through wet alleys, certain I was headed first to jail, then to hell.

Gill never got his chance. The ruse unraveled like a cheap wool sweater, and Riley was out in the cold. His moment of national fame—both cloaked and sullied by deception—ended bitterly with Riley's confession in the *Indianapolis Journal.* His admission of being the perpetrator prompted a torrent of complaints against Riley from both state and big-city newspapers across the country. He was depicted as a criminal, unscrupulous forger. It's said one Detroit newspaper even doubted the existence of Kokomo itself, suggesting the obviously invented (and thoroughly goofy) town name should have been a clue to the deceit. Not known for exuding confidence, Riley was stricken by the bad press. The national papers sprung into low-parody mode,

enjoying a good joke at Riley's—and the spoofed editors'—expenses. Some claimed to have found a Bret Harte poem in an abandoned schoolhouse in Effingham, Illinois. Others supposedly stumbled on a Poe poem etched in chalk on a barn door in Virginia. Still others pondered mysterious symbols scrawled on the back of a turtle hauled up from the dark waters of Hoosierland's Wabash River. To top it off, Riley returned to Anderson only to discover the *Democrat* had summarily fired him. In stereotypical writerly fashion, Riley responded by bending the elbow. He haunted Anderson's courthouse square, drunk and tottering. Later, secluded back home in Greenfield, Indiana, Riley emptied many a bottle to its dregs, depending on his thirteen-year-old sister Mary to shoulder him up the steps to bed.[4]

With the help of friends, Riley slowly righted himself. Surprisingly, he found his skullduggery had actually heightened his literary cachet across the state, where by 1879 he was encountering enthusiastic crowds at his performances of poetry, music, and storytelling. In the fashion of Artemis Ward and Clemens (who'd used newspaper experience to sprout his lecture career), Riley found the East Coast audience appreciated his talent as a writer and impersonator. In relatively short order, Riley had risen from scoundrel to national literary figure. By 1883, Riley had captivated Boston audiences with Hoosier-isms such as "The Old Swimming Hole" and his beloved "When the Frost Is on the Punkin." An excerpt from the latter poem gives a taste of what crowds went gaga over back in the day. Naturally, it's one of Riley's poems that appeared in a newspaper, the *Indianapolis Journal* of August 5, 1882:

When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock,
And you hear the kyouck and gobble of the struttin' turkey cock,
And the clackin' of the guineys, and the cluckin' of the hens,
And the rooster's hallylooyer as he tiptoes on the fence;
O, it's then's the times a feller is a-feelin' at his best,
With the risin' sun to greet him from a night of peaceful rest,
As he leaves the house, bareheaded, and goes out to feed the stock,
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.[5]

By 1890 he had conquered Boston, Philadelphia, and New York—sharing the stage with James Russell Lowell, Clemens, William Dean Howells, George Washington Cable, and others. Later, at an event honoring assassinated President McKinley, President Theodore Roosevelt invited Riley to

read verse in praise of McKinley. The front page of the *Anderson Herald,* formerly edited by Riley's nemesis Kinnard, declared Riley the "great American poet of the day." That was October 1, 1907. Not to be outdone in laying claim to the once-exiled Riley, the city of Anderson six years later hosted a "Riley Day" celebration. Schoolkids, freed from classes for the event, tossed flowers in Riley's path as the town's parade wended down Eighth Street. "This is," Riley is quoted as gushing that evening, "the happiest day of my life." His rehabilitation was now complete. As a medium, the newspaper had offered the portal to East Coast editors and audiences Riley had looked for. And with him, the age of newspaper poetry had reached its zenith.

In Anderson, Indiana, on the spot James Whitcomb Riley School once stood, there now rules a Village Pantry convenience store. Pumpkin orange and green. Twenty-four-hour-bad-neighborhood-gas-and-milk. One hundred years after the 1913 "happiest day" of his life, Riley lies victim of quickie-mart commerce—his own commerce with the nation, like his poetry, forgotten.

2 / Modernism and the Lingering Demise of Newspaper Poetry

Riley might well have laid claim to being *the* great American poet in 1907, when the *Anderson Herald* declared him such. American poetry's beloved figures had toppled one by one into their graves, or they were then chin deep in their dotage. The country's reading public still embraced the Fireside Poets, and the nation's schools taught these poets' work as the pinnacle of American verse. Our country's verse was homely and welcoming, inspirational in all the ways meant to induce good citizenry. Schoolkids memorized and recited verse as a sign of edification and moral fiber; doing so was exercise for mind and soul. Riley suited this bill perfectly. In fact, William J. Long's 1913 widely admired survey volume, *American Literature,* labeled Riley "our present poet laureate of democracy," whose work captured the "hearts of all simple people, at work in the 'old town' or on 'the old farm.'"[6]

This volume also indicates how radically American literary tastes and judgments evolved over the past century. There, Sidney Lanier, for instance, is hailed as a major poet of "haunting lyrics." Whitman, to the contrary, is personified as a "wild apple tree that has never known the virtue of a prun-

ing knife." More to the point, Whitman's "effusions" are said to "indicate a lack of the fine moral sense that distinguishes nearly all American poets. . . . Good taste need not and will not read what only bad taste could have written or published."[7] That comment may as well have issued from the women's sewing circle as from a proper literary scholar. Whitman's "barbaric yawp" insulted the public's and the academy's starched sensibilities.

World War I brought a violent and sweeping curtain-drop to this soporific scene, the social order shoved off-stage and trampled into past-tense dust. Centuries of Western culture, science, religion, government, monarchy, and social institutions tumbled against the horrific backdrop of world war. Not surprisingly, many indicted these institutions as culpable underpinnings of the war's conflagration. Artists of all stripes asked why one should put faith in the old values and social foundations when, after all, these very social forces had produced trench warfare, the machine gun, the tank, gas attacks, and various means of mass and anonymous killing. Romantic poetry—like the sword fight and the cavalry charge—appeared hopelessly outmoded in a culture exercising such destructive wrath.

In came Modernism. Artists and writers railed against just the sort of "decadent" art Riley labored his lifetime to perfect. Many painters, musicians, poets, and fiction writers tossed quaint nineteenth-century aesthetic values onto the ash heap of history. In art, the famous 1913 Armory art show introduced audiences to a gaggle of radically fresh if shockingly disjointed aesthetics, the same year Long ensconced Riley as democracy's poet laureate. Impressionists, Cubists, and Dadaists blasted history, order, and genteel decorum to smithereens. Stravinsky and others captained music into uncharted waters. Discontinuity and fragmentation—both as artistic principles and as human emotions—ruled the day. Science came to be rejected, subjectivity championed, social progress derided, and existentialism promoted. This became the formula for dealing with the modern human condition, a state of being Irving Howe characterized as suffused with an inescapable sense of isolation. Virginia Woolf succinctly describes the wrenching nature of this transition: "Human nature changed. . . . All human relations . . . shifted—those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children, and when human relations change, there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature."[8]

Particularly in the crosshairs was Riley's "bourgeois" poetic sensibility, a mode fraught with sentimentality so prevalent in the newspapers. Now,

T. S. Eliot preached in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," poetry was not "a release of emotion but an escape from it." Ezra Pound proclaimed loudly the "public was stupid." Even the local appreciation Riley favored and editor Long had praised him for—"the old town" and "the old farm"—suddenly was interrogated with a hard eye. An entire literary movement—labeled "The Revolt from the Village"—sprang up to suggest that small-town American life offered no pastoral enclave unassailable by the era's pervasive loneliness. Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* made the point in fiction. Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) did the same in scandalous free verse. These writers' works embodied a "revolt" that deflated Americans' comfortable notions of old town life.

Partly by poets' choices and partly as a result of the newfangled aesthetic these poets ushered in, a schism developed between them and the polite reading public. Poets looking for a modern mode of distributing their verse turned away from the newspapers and slick magazines, for those venues seemed complicit in promoting and sustaining the bankrupt values that had led the modern world astray. If, as Pound suggested, the public *was* stupid, many poets sought a way to reach readers not implicated in that folly. A veritable cornucopia of little magazines, journals free of decadent nineteenth-century aesthetics, launched novel programs of their own making. Representative of this surge is Harriet Monroe's venerable *Poetry,* begun in Chicago in 1912. One circular distributed by Monroe courts Modernist poets, lays out the terms of her journal's rebellion, and heralds the possibilities for this new poetry: "First, a chance to be heard in their own place, without the limitations imposed by the popular magazines. In other words, while the ordinary magazines must minister to a large public little interested in poetry, this magazine will appeal to, and it may be hoped, will develop a public primarily interested in poetry as an art, as the highest, most complete expression of truth and beauty." While Monroe's closing terms may echo the nineteenth century, her aesthetic preferences most assuredly did not.

Monroe's notion of "truth and beauty" favored poets whose work was often experimental and edgy. Although Monroe's own poetry would eventually take on aspects of the emerging modes, her work had to that point stayed the course of the conventional, say, her long ode "The Columbian." Her editorial tastes, however, ran far ahead and off the foot-worn path. The work appearing in her *Poetry* was not always accessible to readers familiar with the civil manners of old verse. It was discontinuous, elliptical, innova-

tive, and often intellectually challenging. Much of it was allusive to other literatures as well as to other literary eras; thus, it was confoundingly *elusive* to many readers.

To illustrate the rapidity of this profound shift in aesthetics and social outlook, compare Robert Frost's 1913 pre–World War I poem "The Pasture" with T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a 1915 wartime piece appearing in *Poetry,* the sort of literary venue beginning to challenge the newspapers as a home for verse. First, here's the Frost:

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may);
I shan't be gone long.—You come too.
I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I shan't be gone long.—You come too.

The rural scene, of course, harkens back to Riley's subject matter, and the poem's determinate metrics and rhyme scheme express traditional verse. What's striking, however, is the speaker's optimism and sense of possibility, an air of American can-do assuredness in the face of small trials. In his world, things can be made right—the clotted spring can be made to flow freely again. In his locale, things are lovingly cared for—witness the mother cow's nurturing attentiveness. Even the cow's tending to her young calf signals a literal clean start for springtime nature. What's more, the poem implies that humans can effect in others and undergo within themselves a similar fresh dawn. The individual speaker, both confident and inviting, extends the hand of community, summoning his reader to amble amid the bucolic scenery and help him put right all things wrong—"You come too."

Now, contrast the tonal spell of Eliot's "Prufrock." Although the piece also welcomes the reader to share the speaker's perambulations—"Let us go then, you and I"—it quickly descends into a not-so-cheerful jaunt across decidedly less hospitable grounds. Eliot's scene is urban not rural, a "half-deserted" locale "muttering" and "insidious" in its invocation of human despair. More important, above these streets the very sky itself lies in dire need of repair, spread "etherized" and suffering upon a gurney. Nothing

in the scene prompts one to believe the procedure will result in anything resembling a happy ending for the heavens or for the earth. No nurturing clean start seems forthcoming for either. What remains is not the material to make things right, but rather the "sawdust" of failed efforts. Even the poem's dollops of chiming end rhymes sink the poem into the empty desolation of "cheap hotels" and "oyster-shells." This scene taunts speaker and reader with an "overwhelming" question that might well be anything for which there is no ready answer: Who am I, what am I doing, what does this life mean? It is the ultimate modern question, askable mostly for its assured unaswerability.

It was Eliot himself who laid out the terms of the new aesthetic, declaring poetry must be "difficult" because the age is difficult. Pound offered his own take in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley": "The age demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace." The new literary journals offered beguilingly unsullied beginnings for poetry of this élan. Unlike the newspapers, which seemed part and parcel of the threadbare social fabric, the little magazines offered venues not implicated in the shoddy collapse of bankrupt culture. Both sides were aware of the aesthetic stakes. The newspapers, believing they held the higher ground, enjoyed trumpeting their kingdom's airy reign. In a 1922 *Poetry* editorial, Monroe responded with sharp-witted vitriol to two such newspaper editorials taunting literary magazines. The *Washington Herald* had harangued: "Literary editors of newspapers know that some of the best verse brought out in America first sees the light of day in the columns of the press. Morocco binding and hand-drawn initials don't insure excellence." Not to be outdone, the *Atlanta Constitution* had poked this pointed jab: "The literary magazines have never had a monopoly of it—and they never will."[9]

In response, Monroe's editorial set out to examine whether "some of the best verse" indeed appeared in newspapers. She concluded that newspapers could justifiably lay claim to "the best light verse" but that those same papers fell embarrassingly short when it came to "the more serious verse."[10] With acid pen, Monroe dismissed this Edgar Guestian sort of newspaper verse as "sermonizing twaddle," asking who might "discover beauty in this cheap rattle of foot-rule rhymes, emotion in this sickish slobber of easy virtue."[11] Monroe pronounced that newspaper and popular magazine poets had sold out to the almighty dollar, pandering their art upon the altar of the capitalist buck. In particular, she castigated the purveyors of poetic drivel, including the exceedingly popular and immensely profitable Guest: "These syndicated rhymers, like the movie-producers, are learning that 'it pays to be good,' that

one 'gets by by giving the emotions of virtue, simplicity, and goodness, with this program paying at the box-office."[12] Monroe had drawn her line in proverbial red ink, marking off the domain of the little magazines' serious artists from the newspapers' poets who cared as much for making money as for making art.

In contrast to this bald profiteering, Monroe's *Poetry* and Margaret Anderson's *Little Review* attracted the sort of poetry newspapers would be reluctant to publish and newspaper readers would be baffled if not also offended by. One could hardly imagine newspapers then publishing, say, Pound's lines inveighing against the catastrophe of World War I and the ultimate uselessness of brave soldiers' deaths. For that matter, one can't imagine our current newspapers printing a poem as condemnatory of the Iraq War as Pound's poem "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly" was of World War I. There, Pound says, "myriad" of the "best" young men died "[f]or an old bitch gone in the teeth / For a botched civilization" whose supposedly timeless gifts amount to nothing more than "broken statues" and "battered books."

Pound's poem lacked the "fine moral sense" William J. Long and his ilk had found missing in Whitman before him. If this represented the "new" poetry Pound had in mind when cajoling artists to "[m]ake it new," then the newspaper could not serve as a welcome home for that verse. The little magazines must become the favored venues for Modernist poetry. But the revolution struggled to sustain itself. Always underfunded, edited by individuals known more for their passion than for their dependability, these little magazines floated like soap bubbles supported by nothing more substantial than the breeze. Many thus popped to nothingness in any ill wind. By the 1930s calamity of the Great Depression, other little mags fell beneath the wheels of the barely chugging economic steam engine that could not carry both itself and them down the tracks, including the *Little Review* and the *Egoist.* Ephemeral, the life span of the little magazine, then and now, resembles that of a garden's morning glory blooms: alluring for a day, then gone.

The rush to publish verse in little magazines was never a full-fledged revolt, for poets unaligned with Modernist tendencies—Monroe's contemptible "syndicated rhymers"—peddled their wares to the newspapers. In fact, many American newspapers still carried a single, safely bowdlerized poem per day until beyond the World War II years, an era when the country, bloodied by global conflagration, stood less enraptured by irony than it is now. The *New York Times* serves as prime example. In 1945, the year World

War II closed, the *Times* printed roughly a poem a day, as its yearly *Index*'s four columns of printed verse amply display. Among them were two timely poems by Edna St. Vincent Millay, "For My Brother Han and My Sisters, in Holland" and "To the Leaders of the Allied Nations." By 1948, though, the *Times* printed only a smattering of poems. By 1950, none at all. For half a century newspaper poetry seemed extinct; then came the new millennium and a few adventurous souls seeking to resuscitate this aesthetic dodo. Now, let's see how that bird fares in our brave new digital world.

CHAPTER 5

Aesthetic Dodo

Five decades after newspaper verse seemingly succumbed to extinction, some parties now labor to reintroduce newspaper poetry's aesthetic dodo into journalism's dwindling wilds. Chief among them is 2004–6 U.S. poet laureate Ted Kooser. Funded by the Poetry Foundation (the providential recipient of Ruth Lilly's circa $200 million pro-poetry largesse), Mr. Kooser writes a free weekly column for newspapers and online publications featuring his brief, two-sentence introduction to a contemporary American poem. In addition, a few newspapers—literally, a handful—have reentered the fray by again publishing poems within their pages, some of which appear on the newspapers' opinion pages. This nascent movement warrants our attention, and our scrutiny, for the social as well as the aesthetic assumptions behind it.

To some it's ironic, and to others sacrilegious, that the foundation home of the esteemed *Poetry* has embraced the same newspapers Monroe decades earlier trenchantly belittled as purveyors of "virtue, simplicity, and goodness." Monroe established her little magazine in opposition to the newspaper poetry of her day. One faction of poets argues that the foundation is merely responding pragmatically to realities of poetry's diminishing audience by seeking a wider public venue. A counterfaction expresses concerns about the dumbing-down of American poetry through the vehicle of newspaper verse, privately suggesting Monroe spins an editorial tornado in her grave at the thought of this alliance.

No matter whose side one aligns with, some facts are indisputable. Since the 1950s American poetry has existed in a netherworld fashioned by academia and a nursery of reborn little magazines, many university supported.

Many argue that poetry hardly owns a voice in the larger public discourse. In their minds poetry has slipped into a (too?) cozy relationship with the university, where many poet-professors have become comfortably ensconced. Chief among the disgruntled are those groups discussed in chapter 1. Labeled "opposing poetries" by Hank Lazer, these groups include practitioners of Language, feminist, slam, performance, ethno-poetries, and other modes opposed to the current version of "academic" verse. These groups reside on the outside of a university-poetry network they regard as relatively clubby. They contend the arrangement has engendered complacency in poets whose work has flourished in this hothouse, an audience composed of other poets and professors but generally not the common public reader.

This is just the sort of supposed elitism the American Life in Poetry (ALIP) project seeks to counteract. Its sole purpose is "to promote poetry" among the general populace, using the newspaper as the ideal democratic vehicle to do so.[1] Kooser himself remains adamantly devoted to that mission. Told by an acquaintance that other poet friends didn't care for his poetry column, the former U.S. laureate responded that "the column is not for poets but for people reading newspapers. I could [not] care less what the poets think."[2] Kooser has staked out his target audience, and it's not the poets' hothouse described earlier but the public domain, citizens whose candle of affection for poetry may well have gone unlit since fifth grade or has long since exhausted its wick. Curiously, despite the project's intentions to move poetry out of its dominant university setting, the ALIP project has failed to win over the "opposing poetry" camps, who in the main consider its offerings still to be tainted by stodgy "academic" aesthetics.

Aiming to present poems that are "brief and that will be enjoyable and enlightening to newspaper readers," the column avers to reach approximately 2.5 million readers via roughly two hundred newspapers nationwide.[3] Instead of preaching to the proverbial choir, the column has moved its pulpit to those daily newspapers still plopped before sunrise on America's front porches. The column has taken on a towering task made even more gargantuan by decades of the large-scale national media's disinterest in poetry. Unless one finds fault with public proselytizing in favor of verse, it is difficult not to admire Kooser's gumption at work here. The project's goals and methods become thorny, however, when one ponders both the dominant style of featured poems and their means of presentation to the public—considerations that walk hand in hand. In short, the newspaper venue

predicates that only poems of a certain *type* must be put forward. Restricted to roughly twenty lines that fit the columnar format, nothing too lengthy or too long-lined fits the narrow bill. Once these format assumptions couple with notions of newspapers' necessarily PG content, the risks loom obvious. One worries poems surviving such a phalanx of corporate rules and censors' red pens will fall bland upon the page.

The reality is that within these rules' Liechtensteinian-sized borders ALIP manages to introduce a number of worthy poems. The problem here is not chiefly a matter of poetic quality but rather the series' distressingly unvaried choice of topics. Most featured poems safely engage only the peaceable kingdoms of animals and domestic life in principally harmless fashion. A fair summary of archived ALIP poems' subjects includes an aging mother and her equally aging dog, a pregnant woman's strange food cravings, a sixteen-year-old girl's anger with her mother, the daily chore of laundry, the burial of a beloved pet cat, a pot of lentils cooking on the stove, and the allure of family photo albums. Each of these subjects stands valid in itself, but taken as a group, their domestic sameness drones soporific. In the manner of television producers who discover success with the crime show *CSI* and thereafter produce endless knockoffs to please viewers, the column assumes what qualities the public wants in a poem and proceeds to give them more of it. Television executives' motives are understandable if not defensible in a corporate culture bent on profits. But the province of poetry—decidedly not capitalistic in its current terms—has characteristically been to extend human taste for and appreciation of art. Poetry ought not seek simply to reflect assumed human taste but rather aspire to create and enhance it. Poetry ought to guide culture to places it has not been, rather than circling the aesthetic wagons to camp in one's own backyard. One aspect of our human experience, the home scene is thus ripe poetic subject, but it alone does not reflect the broad human milieu, all we are about or everything we quest for.

Despite its domestic setting, Sharon Olds's "My Son the Man" shows that ALIP poems can show a pulse that rises above the flat line. Olds's ponderings on mother-and-son-hood unchains readers from the mundane, even as she recalls the nightly ritual of slipping her son into his pajamas and tossing him into the prebedtime air. These maternal memories soon enough take a swerve into more perilous musings when the poet suggests she must overcome her "fear of men" now that her son is soon to join those ranks. Just what that fear is and where its roots lie are matters the poet chooses not to

pursue in this piece. She does, however, come to realize that her son's growing up is also a kind of growing away, an escape from the mother from whom he was birthed. Olds goes on, in fact, to compare the boy's birthing with Houdini's ability to emerge unscathed from chains and padlock while submerged in waters metaphorically compared to the womb's. The poem concludes with the speaker's realization that her son now regards her

the way Houdini studied a box
to learn the way out, then smiled and let himself be manacled.[4]

With its blend of private and public history, Olds's poem works considerable sleight of hand, unmasking her own fears while training the reader's eye on her son's emerging manhood. Roughly sensual, the poem's crude image equating childbirth with Houdini's trunk cracking through the Hudson's ice might well make some soccer mommies squeamish. What's more, Olds's poem suggests a son must necessarily escape from his mother twice—once bodily, and then emotionally—for him to become a man of his own design. This final observation may well please Freudians but may also bedevil feminists.

Many American Life in Poetry selections present subjects rural or familial, as with so many nineteenth-century newspaper offerings. That could well be the series' Achilles' heel. The trick, then, comes in choosing poems that descend beyond the homely topic and reach deeper wellsprings. David Baker's "Mongrel Heart" uses a dog's sloppy expressiveness to convey subtle measures of loneliness and joy:

Up the dog bounds to the window, baying
like a basset his doleful tearing sounds
from the belly, as if mourning a dead king,

and now he's howling like a beagle—yips, brays,
gagging growls—and scratching the sill paintless,
that's how much he's missed you, the two of you

both of you, mother and daughter, my wife
and child. All week he's curled at my feet,
warming himself and me watching more TV,

or wandered the lonely rooms, my dog shadow,
who like a poodle now hops, amped-up windup
maniac yo-yo with matted curls and snot nose

smearing the panes, having heard another car
like yours taking its grinding turn down
our block, or a school bus, or bird-squawk,

that's how much he's missed you, good dog,
companion dog, dog-of-all-types, most excellent dog
I told you once and for all we should never get.[5]

Baker's speaker relates the dog's nearly manic behavior as modes of loneliness and hoped-for reuniting with loved ones. One wonders why the speaker lavishes attention on the dog's slobbery, pouting, all-consuming aloneness. Then one realizes the speaker is an American male, and as such, he dare not reveal his own loneliness without forfeiting his masculinity. So the dog serves as his stand-in, a creature who can claim his emotions honestly and display them openly. We readers get the notion it's really the speaker who has most missed "the two of you, / both of you, mother and daughter, my wife / and child"—an admission he can bring himself to make only via his surrogate, the family dog. That he was wrong about getting the dog implies the speaker has been wrong about much else, adding a hint of menace to the wife and daughter's absence. Where are they, and why haven't they returned?

Both poems illustrate that short, even domestic poems may ascend beyond mere sentimentality if they issue from skilled hands. Finding those poems, however, is the trial. Some newspapers have set out on their own to identify suitable poems for publication, skirting the American Life in Poetry column altogether. A handful of papers publish work that comes in over the transom or work they've solicited themselves. Most recently, this ever-changing group is composed of a mix of national and local newspapers that have not yet but may soon give up on poetry, including the *Christian Science Monitor,* the *Philadelphia Inquirer,* the *York* (Pennsylvania) *Daily Record,* the *Santa Cruz Sentinel,* and the *Oregonian* of Portland.

One newspaper, the *Iowa City Press-Citizen,* smack dab in the heart of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, experimented in 2006 with assigning poet and recent Ph.D. Mike Chasar to write topical (mostly rhyming) poems

to be run on the op-ed page for its thirty thousand daily readers. In some respects, Chasar was plying the same trade as our nineteenth-century hero, James Whitcomb Riley. Chasar's experience with writing what Calvin Trillin called "deadline poetry" resulted in poems on local topics such as the F2 tornado that spiraled through Iowa City on April 13, 2006, and on broader issues such as the nation's 2006 midterm elections. Chasar admits that relying on known poetic forms and what he calls "unoriginal language" enabled him to hunt-and-peck his poems in short order. In "Sonnet for the Aftermath" Chasar even makes fun of his own task: "We know, however, Iowa City is smart. / We . . . turn disasters into statements with our art." Even in liberal and open-minded Iowa City, Chasar encountered the genteel limits of newspaper editorial taste when he floated a poem on Britney Spears's fondness for eschewing underwear. When he used the anatomical term "pudendum" to describe what overexposure had exposed of Ms. Spears, the higher-ups blanched. Undaunted, Chasar quickly rewrote his limerick, rhyming "pits," "fits," "transparent," and "naughty bits"—the latter his sanitized anatomical reference. His experience as newspaper-topical-poet brought with it a modicum of "local celebrity" and an occasional free beer from satisfied readers, all in all an argument in favor of more such verse.[6]

How do other newspapers entice poets to submit work to venues long dissociated from verse publication? The *Philadelphia Inquirer* solves that quandary by relying on a stock exercise of the creative writing workshop. In short, the newspaper's opinion page editor provides a prompt based on recent newspaper articles and invites readers to respond, using article headlines as their poems' titles. In late December/early January, the *Inquirer* features a week's worth of these poems as "Poets in the News." One wonders why the practice is limited to the end of the calendar year, when most readers' minds are depressingly afflicted with the vagaries of holiday parties and Seasonal Affective Disorder. Still, what's come of it brims with surprisingly topical energy, no doubt due to the poems' being linked to newspaper commentary. Here's something by Charles Bernstein, a fervid proponent of Language poetry. Language poetry's intellectual playfulness, philosophical underpinnings, and Marxist sympathies often produce just the sort of convoluted verse many newspaper readers run from in abject despair. Intellectually torqued and theoretically refined, Language Poetry would seem on the surface the diametric opposite of public verse. Public verse of the newspaper variety, in fact, implies both mode and readership that Language poets largely disdain. Note,

however, the skillful manner in which Bernstein engages the social dialogue, tweaking the values of his assumed audience in "A Theory's Evolution":

> *The theory of Flawed Design is not a scientifically proven*
> *Alternative to evolution. It is based on the everyday life*
> *Experience that natural selection could not have produced*
> *Such a catastrophic outcome. Optimists and the religiously*
> *Inclined will naturally prefer evolution as an explanation,*
> *Since ascribing Design to the state of humanity is almost*
> *Unbearable. For the rest of us, we must continue to insist*
> *That the theory of Flawed Design be taught cheek and jowl,*
> *Neck and neck, mano e mano, with Mr. Darwin's*
> *Speculations. The Theory postulates a creator who is Mentally*
> *Impaired, either through some genetic defect or because of*
> *Substance abuse, and is predisposed to behave in a sociopathic*
> *Manner; although some Benign Flawed Design theorists, as*
> *They call themselves, posit the radical alternative that the*
> *Creator was distracted or inattentive and the flaws are not the*
> *Result of Malevolent Will but incompetence or incapacity.*[7]

John Timpane, the opinion page editor who printed Bernstein's poem, admits with barely concealed glee that the poem catalyzed public response. Predictably, a firestorm erupted from the fanatical religious right and from those who consider themselves mere believers. Letters poured in, as one might imagine—some venomous and threatening, others amused and supportive. But the newspaper's circulation did not plummet, nor was Mr. Timpane unceremoniously removed from his post. Instead, Timpane contends, the *Inquirer* actually gained stature as a newspaper willing to engage a variety of opposing opinions. Moreover, that the poem appeared on the opinion page, where legions of the angry and misinformed already share their public diatribes, provided natural cover for the newspaper. Godspeed, and pass the literary ammunition.

So What?

What's the future for poetry and the newspapers? I can't say for certain, but I know my own fondness for the daily rag has not been transmitted by genet-

ics or by example to my sixteen-year-old son, Joe. Joe never turns a single page of the newspaper, though I ceremonially drop it in his lap or carefully position it under his morning cereal bowl. His disavowal of the daily paper extends even to the sports page. Though he's a decent second baseman and soccer midfielder, he doesn't look to the paper for news on his favorite professional players or teams. Why squint at the small print of a box score when ESPN's *SportsCenter* shows the winning home run in near-real-time digital color?! When his own soccer team's key victory makes the newspaper, he'll read what I scissor out for him. Otherwise, *nada.*

On the other hand, my older sister thumbs each day through a couple newspapers, including the *Salem* (Indiana) *Leader.* Lori and her husband farm a smallish plot of southern Indiana, literally out in the sticks. After graining the cattle each morning, after bottle-feeding Hercules the young bull whose mother died while birthing him, after checking the girls to see if one is ready to birth, she returns to the kitchen counter's coffee and toast. With it, she reads the *Leader.* Once a week she plows the American Life in Poetry column, accepting its poetic offering the same way she does her horoscope—half believing she'll glean some insight into her life. Sometimes she calls and says, "Hey, that was a good one," forgetting my local—the *Peoria Journal Star*—refuses to carry the column. Other times she reads to me a line or two she likes. Still others, she asks me if she's got it right, though these poems are supposedly as transparent as the spring water trickling through my sister's acreage.

Is it generational, simply a matter of age, this difference in how my sister and my son regard the newspaper? Or is it better understood as an expression of how these two generations embrace technological evolution? Whatever the case, newspaper poetry has its work cut out for itself. One wonders how many of those two hundred newspapers' 2.5 million readers actually read the ALIP column. Surely, not every subscriber reads the paper front to back every day. Though we baby boomers nearing retirement age have vested interest in our retirement funds, how many of us read the business section religiously? How many the sports page and the obits? How many the daily comics? How many the police beat and the two lame gals trying to dispense dead–Ann Landers advice to dysfunctional America? Wouldn't it be delicious to compare the numbers reading, say, their horoscopes with those reading the newspaper's ALIP poem? Has poetry, long diminished in national media consciousness, hitched its wagon to newspapers' darkening star?

This much is undeniable. If newspaper poetry in all its manifestations

is to avoid falling to extinction, and indeed, if it is to flourish, not merely survive, some format changes are advisable.

First, drop the twenty-line limit. Don't give in to readers' supposedly short attention spans. Readers will read on if one gives them something engaging enough they can't quit before it quits. Moreover, put on asbestos gloves and spoon readers something spicier than verbal Gerber. Give them an occasional aesthetic challenge that disrupts as much as soothes their uninterrogated assumptions about poetry. Lead the public to new emotional and intellectual places. Otherwise, one risks bowdlerizing the art to suit the populace, in the process further deadening the culture.

Second, broaden subject matter beyond the stove-warm kitchen of domesticity. There's nothing to object to in these poems, which is the intention, of course—and also the problem. Although outright vulgarity is out of the question, one can still admit poems whose subject and attitude some might find objectionable. The Bernstein poem offers evidence it can be done with success and impunity. If necessary, place the poem on the opinion page, where intellectually challenging and socially thorny dialogue already takes place, or ought to. This provides the veil of free speech as defense against those who might object to a poem's theme or manner. My own local newspaper resorted to printing Gary Trudeau's "Doonesbury" comic on the op-ed page in response to Peoria's button-downed middle-class complaints, and that silenced the lot of them.

Finally, be doubly smart: pair hard copy with a companion poetry page on newspapers' Internet sites. Otherwise, one will never engage a generation reared in the era of YouTube, the iPod, and the camera-MP3-player-Internet-surfing-cell-phone. This audience is as distracted as they are engaged by communal culture. Use their words and their own forum to disabuse them of the notion that no one's listening and that nothing matters. What's more, add Web site audio and video components so those visiting the site can *see* and *hear* poets reading their works aloud.

To reinvigorate poetry within public media in any lasting way, poets and editors must avail themselves of a range of distribution modes, both digital and hard copy. While we need not—please!—harken back to the quaint era of Rileyesque newspaper verse, poets ought to seize an opportunity to inveigle the newspapers that long ago abandoned us. Let us seduce them into sweet complicity in delivering the life-giving if alternative "news" William Carlos Williams suggests poems both embody and express. Let's do so with poems that have edge and sheen.

SECTION TWO

On Technology & the Writerly Life

CHAPTER 6

Poems and Pixels

The Work of Art in an Age of Digital Reproduction

Technology emerges to satisfy desire. Over time, this technology meant to gratify instead creates new desire, eliciting within us yearnings of its own making. Herein lies the evolution of art and of marketing campaigns. In popular culture, our hankering to see and to be seen via digital video has been generated by technology's ability to make it so. In the province of art, what was once valued for its uniqueness is now valued for its ubiquity. Reproducibility, once the bane of the artistic object, now seeds mass audience for mass products. In short, in an era of instantaneous and omnipresent digital reproduction, what we consider to be artful and the ways we encounter art have evolved dramatically since Walter Benjamin's magisterial essay, whose title here I humbly adapt.

More deeply than his contemporaries, Benjamin, the Jewish writer-critic who fled Nazism only to commit suicide when refused entry into Spain, understood the implications of evolving artistic creation and conveyance. In his 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin addresses the ways technology affects human interaction with art and more basically with the physical laws of nature. He also intuits more change waits in the offing, citing poet Paul Valéry's hyperbolic pronouncement that beginning with the twentieth century "neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial."[1] Under the guise of accessibility, the very basis of the individual's contemplation of and interaction with art has been altered in a manner promising effects both immediate and evolving.

For the art of poetry, its bookish star eclipsed by technological advances of film, digital video, recorded music, and the Internet, this issue proves to be particularly keen. How will poetry—arguably the world's first art form—respond to technological upheaval threatening to make the book's means of artistic expression and delivery as outdated as the eight-track player's? In the answer to that question rests poetry's vibrant future or its slippage into irrelevancy, a venial form of extinction. More than seventy years following the publication of Benjamin's landmark essay, one would do well to revisit his conclusions, updating technology's implications for the way art—particularly poetry—is created and received.

I / Artistic "Aura" and the Hierarchy of Aesthetic Experience

Like the wondrous transporter of the *Star Trek* television series, technology of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has focused its energies inexorably upon overcoming the constraints of space, time, and matter. Though we still can't effectively *Star Trek*–transport one form of matter—human beings—we can instantaneously transmit digitized forms of text, video, and audio, thereby altering human conception of space and time. For artists, and for those who receive and value art, this capability has changed not only how art is created and conveyed but also how we regard the very notion of what is artful.

All artistic and intellectual heavy lifting was heretofore performed by human beings using (thus limited by) the reach of their voices and hands. Now, with the advent of digital technology and the allure of the Internet, the intent is not so much to defy space, time, and matter but instead to conspire with them against themselves, conveying matter universally in *space* and simultaneously in *time.* In the arts, the effects are notable. No longer is painting, musical performance, or drama bound by place and time for a limited audience. The mode of delivery and reception of art has moved casually from the auditorium or gallery to one's home and, even more intimately, to the palm of one's hand. The multifunctional gadgetry of the cellular telephone—evidence the hubbub surrounding Apple's iPhone—has become either our portal to the larger world or evil's contemporary 666.

For Benjamin, with the advent of mechanical reproduction "that which withers . . . is the aura of the piece of art."[2] In his view a work of art's "aura" sets its roots in the domain of tradition, in the viewer's solitary contempla-

tion of a painting or an audience's hearing a chorale presentation in an auditorium or in open air. That interaction depends upon a particular blend of object, event, place, time, and the historical tradition of both object and viewer. Benjamin believes mechanical reproduction removes the viewer or listener from the tradition and its particularity, supplanting both with a copy, a likeness not wholly vested in either realm. In this way, Benjamin equates *proximity* with *intimacy* when it comes to an audience's response to original art. And he conflates *proximal distance* and *aesthetic distance*—suggesting if one's not in the physical presence of original art or the artist, then one cannot truly inhabit an artistic work.

Benjamin is onto something about the relation of proximity and aesthetic intimacy for many art forms. No doubt one's encounter with art is affected greatly by the environment in which one receives it. Standing alone in a gallery before a Rothko strikes an experience different not only in means but also in quality from that afforded by viewing the painting on one's computer screen. Insisting on the primacy of intimate experiences with art, music, and drama, Benjamin proposes a hierarchy of aesthetic encounters that holds some experiences superior to others in form, quality, intensity, and purity. Here's how I configure such hierarchy. Imagine that the most intimate experiences with art lie at the pinnacle of an immense mountain, while all the other, less intimate forms of encounter rest below the summit, shouldering up this highest point. One's acme aesthetic episodes vivify the human experience. They reveal what is fundamental to one's self, what is durable not ephemeral, what is core not tangential, what is defining not incidental.

Admittedly, the notion is elitist. This hierarchy is frequently determined less by human choice than by one's access and proximity to art (and too often by one's economic status). Somewhere along the flanks of this looming peak, well below the apex, lie the locales where and how *most* of us experience art *most* of the time.

Acknowledging the reality of this hierarchy of aesthetic experience ought not to devalue utterly those occasions that reside below the summit. How, then, explain one's rush of joy listening to a compact disk version of Mozart's twenty-eighth or the pleasurable edification of hearing Yusef Komunyakaa's reading a poem on one's iPod? What makes that symphony thrill us via its mere digital presence, the poem resonate without the poet's being there? Where on this hierarchy falls one's listening to the poet's digitized voice via ears too small to drink in his baritone? In short, the existence

of hierarchy surely does not imply all recorded music or poetry or video is aesthetically bankrupt. If so, only those who heard Mozart in the flesh, sat at the feet of Longfellow as he recited "The Cross of Snow," or viewed the *Mona Lisa* in person could be said to have enjoyed a worthy artistic experience. Let us agree, then, that a hierarchy of aesthetic experience implies a range of what can be regarded as primary and secondary encounters, some more evocative than others.

Benjamin's conception of an art's peculiar aura differs markedly from our current compulsions. Is not the Internet our culture's effort to make every known thing available to everyone at all times everywhere? To view the *Mona Lisa,* one need not travel to the Louvre, buy a ticket, stand in line, and then elbow one's way to the front. Instead, simply click Google images. Sooner or later, amid the Frisbee-catching dogs, the huddled and starving Sudanese, the paparazzi shots of Lindsey Lohan's car wreck and Britney's newest rehab, there you'll find her coy smile, digitized, enlargeable with a mouse click, and printable in full rainbow array if the printer's color ink has not gone kaput. Consider the utter efficiency of the digital copy in achieving these sorts of ends, whether via audio or video reproduction. Consider as well the laudatory intentions our current culture commonly applies to such reproduction, viewing it as generous agent of democratization in the arts. In many ways we're right to think so.

Benjamin might well complain we've killed artistic aura through "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially."[3] But of course. We humans are trying—feverishly and perhaps clumsily—to put ourselves in the presence of art, overcoming the constraints of *proximity* as means to *intimacy.* Benjamin envisions works of art received and valued in two polar modes: as ceremonial objects where "the accent is on the cult value" or as objects to be exhibited for larger public viewing.[4] The former is represented by the ancient human's painting of an elk inside the cave or a statue meant for religious veneration and ritual *in situ.* The object and its place posit a context not amenable to duplication. The second is the sort of thing made to be sent around for display, say, the painted cows that adorned Chicago street corners one summer not long ago.

Mechanical and now digital reproduction mean if one can't actually see the real thing, one can see copies that differ from the originals in ways largely undetectable to the human eye. Certainly, these copies lack the authenticity not to mention the patina granted by time and aging, but they're expert

knockoffs, some capably reproduced by hand but most by machine or now by computer. For example, Johannes Vermeer's wonderful *Girl with a Pearl Earring,* valued at roughly $100 million, hangs in a museum in The Hague, available for viewing by those with tickets and patience. Last summer, however, a new Vermeer museum opened in Delft featuring *only* reproductions. And for those who can't make it even to the museum of assembled fakes, one can order copies online, essentially, a reproduction of a reproduction. Still, what gives these copies value remains the value of the original, safely tucked away in a museum, viewable daily by hundreds as opposed to the hundreds of thousands afforded access by the Internet.

What's more, in our, as opposed to Benjamin's day, cult status and exhibition status have morphed into the same thing, one force giving birth to as well as feeding off the other. What else is a celebrity but one who has earned cult following not on the basis of art but by virtue of being forever on exhibit? Those without talent argue their uniqueness by their ubiquity. Their talent, if you will, is being seen. Paris Hilton is forever before our eyes because she is forever before our eyes. More to the point, Ms. Hilton has curried cult following not only by being on exhibit but also by being an exhibitionist. In the obvious titillation of her bedroom tape and her televised quest for a new BFF, one might well posit within the public's appetite for Hilton some deeper revelation of their own desire to be seen and thus to be noticed.

Such fame used to come in small doses, played before an audience limited in scope by the size of the venue itself. This was particularly true of staged drama. Now the film and video industry enables actors to reach a worldwide audience instantaneously, as well as in the dribs and drabs of DVD rental, video downloads, and pirated copies. Admittedly, the image of the actor appearing on screen exhibits merely a copy, a reproduction, a replica. But staged drama has always been dependent equally on illusion and on the audience's willing suspension of disbelief. As Barbara Hernstein Smith notes, when the audience of *Hamlet* witnesses a queen drinking poison, audience members do not jump from their aisle seats to wrest the foul cup from her hand.[5] We understand these events are not happening but are merely being represented as occurring in real time. Still, our emotions rise and fall in unison with the dramatic action. Do we feel the same about the two-dimensional figure we know as "James Bond," a copy of a make-believe man played by an actor we know as Connery or Moore or Dalton, and so on, when some madman bent on world destruction ties him below a descending pendulum?

Is it not possible that humans have adapted to technology, or that technology has adapted us, in such a way that we accept the two-dimensional copy as both illusory and real? Is not a similar willing suspension of disbelief at work when we read a poem? We readers understand there's a person behind the voice who speaks both as poet and as character speaking to us the poet's poem, itself a made thing, a work of art. Yet we knowingly savor its layers of illusion, both accepting and dismissing them in service of art.

In 1998 Peter Eriksson of Sweden's Sahlgrenska University Hospital discovered the human brain undergoes continual regeneration of neurons throughout the life cycle. Now scientists understand that brains of persons well into their seventies continue to experience "neurogenesis," a kind of rewiring of the hippocampus. One can thus assume repeated exposure to film, video, and other digital delights modifies the brain's wiring as means of reception as well as of enjoyment. New technologies create new human receptive abilities. In turn, these abilities generate new human desires.

2 / To Be Seen

That's the new yearning, the restless call for attention. It's akin to the child's nighttime crying from the crib. This time, however, the comforting comes not from caress or lullaby but simply from being acknowledged amid the black crepe curtains of the faceless night. New technology creates not only new forms of expression but also, and importantly, new ways to satisfy human cravings.

Mass reproduction and mass distribution of digital media have changed the way we recognize ourselves and others. First, technology that makes us seen actually fuels our primal human burning to be seen. Because we can be seen, we *must* be seen to be real in our own eyes and in others'. Second, technology that shows us the lives of others accentuates our corollary desire to pry into those private lives made public. The result is a heightening of individual and cultural voyeurism. In general, getting oneself filmed and thereafter displayed is akin to what getting one's name happily in the newspaper meant for those in predigital video culture. Each instance brings a rush of communal and self-recognition. Video itself has become a social organ, a detached mode of interaction that keeps one before the public eye. And this, remember, matters most in a culture where the "eye" rules.

What happens, however, to our conception of art, and of acting itself,

when the action is removed not only from the dramatic stage but also from the movie production studio? Undeniably, one upshot is reality TV, the arena where real people act like real people acting real. Viewers suspect much is scripted, edited, and realigned to create drama that may not have been there in the first place, but still we watch with rapt if ironic attention. Our doing so manifests the culture's confusion about what's art and what's life. In total, this confusion diminishes the value of both.

Benjamin was struck by film's intrusion into everyday life, so much so that even an ostensibly journalistic venture such as the newsreel offers "everyone the opportunity to rise from passerby to movie extra."[6] Presciently, he foresaw the day "any man" might "find himself part of a work of art."[7] In short, Benjamin recognized the muting of the line between actor and audience, expert and amateur. Given the rise and omnipresence of video equipment, that day has birthed full-grown from the Zeus's head of the digital camera. It's not knowledge this modern Athena brings, or the slightest akilter wisdom, but a way to be seen, to be exposed, to be a star reveling in one's fifteen minutes of Warholian fame.

Now a throng of video mavens rakes in huge sums by making everyday folks "part of a work of art." No doubt this notion has salvaged the careers of B-actors such as Bob Saget, reading camp introductions to yet another round of *America's Funniest Home Videos* while screwing a smile upon his pancake-makeupped face. These programs exemplify an even more vital evolution in the making and distribution of video art. In a nutshell, that amounts to the blending if not inversion of the roles of actor and director. Now everyone can produce, direct, and star in his/her own video masterpiece. No Experience Necessary. Seven decades ago, Benjamin isolated this new reality and presciently spelled out its current terms: "The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation."[8] Indeed, in a remarkable twist, those rank amateurs who upload their videos to the Internet's YouTube have wrested artistic control from the hands of "experts." They have become artists empowered to reach an ever-broadening audience of the like-minded. Yes, most have still not cornered the profits from such a venture. In fitting capitalist fashion, the money still graces someone else's palm.

No matter. The real goal here is not wealth as much as notoriety. Surely this motivated my daughter's friend Craig to be filmed while gulping down a full bottle of Mrs. Butterworth's maple syrup in one bottoms-up binge (mim-

icking a scene from the stoney comedy film *Super Troopers*). That stunt landed him happily on YouTube. Another corollary if unintended result was Craig's post–mama-Butterworth's sugar-induced, trembling, hyperactive bad trip. This venture into worldwide digital culture did not establish Craig's stardom nationally, as it has for others who have parlayed YouTube "lonely girl" videos or self-created bizarre ethnic characters into larger television and movie roles. Instead, he merely secured his local status as a wild and crazy guy, an achievement in itself.

Craig's stunt is not high art, but I'd lay claim to its attempt to make art with a small "a," humor in the crude mode of *Jackass,* where Steve-o wears a diaper packed with crawfish or drunks box while tilting akilter on stilts. The urge of both video ventures is less to outrage their audiences than to be outrageous as a way to be seen.

Consider the *everywherenicity* of the camera. It's now part of every street corner, supposedly keeping us safe. It's the agent of our alleged defense against terrorist plots in airports as well as bus and train terminals. It's how parents film (and thus remember) a son's first goal or a daughter's horseback-riding blue ribbon. It's both the source of keepsake photos we scrapbook away and the means of carrying those photos with us at all times on our laptop or cell phone galleries. It is our way of recording the chimera of daily existence, impossibly various and overwhelming in its velocity. And the video camera is the first technology able to keep up with that frantic pace, to play back for us what happened to happen while we were looking elsewhere, thinking elsewhere, being elsewhere. Who now resolves, as my mother once urged me, to "take a picture with your mind" to remember a distinctive scene? Why, Mom, when my camera phone's in hand?

While the desire to validate one's existence may not be new, the means—as well as the compulsion—to do so via digitized media quite assuredly is. As Narcissus was once seduced by his watery reflection, have we not become enamored of our own video likeness? The second generation of psychoanalytic theory known as object relations theory (Donald Woods Winnicott, Heinz Kohut, Harry Guntrip, et al.) focused on the developing self's desire to have self-worth "mirrored back" to us by a loving parental object. Over time, we seek out other objects to do the same—one's god or art or a loving spouse—but the yearning is the same: to have one's sense of being valued and safe underwrite our ability to venture out into a frightening world. This primary narcissism is a core ingredient of one's mental health.

When this narcissism becomes pathological, however, we show a desperate need to have others confirm our self-worth; we brag, show off, and generally exhibit desperate need for affirmation from others. Our culture's love of video expressions of self may be less narcissistic intoxication than fear. That yearning drives our looking for ourselves outside ourselves, our dependence on a mirror that follows and replicates our every action. In doing so, we hope to make others see us in the way we wish to be seen. We see and are seen, verifying our existence in the midst of creation's jumble. Likely, one's having been bombarded by filmic expressions of others, the waterfall of faces that spills over contemporary society, has fed an inner wish to situate one's own face amid that Heraclitean cascade and thus momentarily to blend with it. Technology provides the means.

3 / To Be Seen. To Be Heard.

These, the twin darlings of contemporary digital culture. What the camera has done for one's need to be seen, the Internet has done for one's corollary yearning to be heard. In the realm of poetry, to have one's words acknowledged by publication was heretofore a mark of some distinction. Even charlatans long ago caught on to this. These unsavory folks prey on the aged and the youthful through the scam of world poetry anthologies proclaiming their eagerness to discover, reward, and publish the work of the uninitiated. How many American coffee tables sport a gold-filigreed hardbound anthology that features a poem by Grandma or little Jennifer? Accepting all entries, these publishers bank on selling Grandma the gaudy, $199 collector's edition to commemorate her inclusion in this rare compendium of verse. Then there's the Florida poetry festival she's won her way to—food and accommodations available at a verse package rate, of course—where she can meet other aspiring poets and pose for a picture with a special guest TV personality, say, Bob Barker, chosen for appeal to the geriatric set. There's no end to the angles these guys ply.

Now, Grandma, if she or her grandson is Web-savvy, can simply publish her work in an online e-zine, or better, start up her own poetry blog. On the face of it, what's not to like in this sort of democratization of art? Aspiring poets, fiction writers, essayists, and the like no longer have to kneel at the fortress walls of big-name journals and presses, sliding their manuscripts under the great iron gates and affixing SASE with proper return postage. Via

the Internet, they reach a truly worldwide audience of readers, serious and dilettante alike.

For many in po-biz, this situation threatens havoc. Now, the barbarians are not merely at the gates; they control the gates and have cranked them wide open. Benjamin noted the coming of this brave new world, cautioning "the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character."[9] Somewhere near the end of the eighteenth century, the longstanding proportion of writers to readers exploded, ending an extended era where a few (mostly male) authors wrote to the large audience of readers. In sum, great numbers of readers abruptly became writers. That access was gained in forms as various as letters to the editor, technical reports, specialized business documents, and so on. In droves, women began to write, a gaggle Nathaniel Hawthorne labeled "a damn mob of scribbling women." Aldous Huxley sums up the situation aptly: "It follows from all this that in all the arts the output of trash is absolutely and relatively greater than it was in the past; and that it must remain greater for just so long as the world continues to consume the present inordinate quantities of reading-matter, seeing-matter, and hearing-matter."[10] What would Mr. Huxley say about the Internet's virtual virtual-cornucopia of stuff to read, see, and hear?

More to the point, now there's no single editor with gavel at the ready to judge one's work unworthy of publication or even of rebuke. There's only the viewers' approval or disdain. The Web's a free-floating Wild West of messy and utter democracy, a wilderness unbroken by fences, judges, sheriffs, or notions of hierarchy. One need not have studied at university, toiled in research among the dusty catacombs of libraries, or memorized Latin verb conjugations in a drafty dormitory. One need have no demonstrable skill, for there is no juror to whom or no committee to which one must prove such ability. Even in his day, Benjamin bemoans this turn: "Literary license is now founded on polytechnic rather than specialized training."[11] Perhaps the only requirement for self-publishing on the Web is one's having a modicum of technological savvy.

4 / The Gates, and Who Needs Them

Having been one of those outside the gates, I appreciate the notion of learning how to get around if not over them. And I affirm the obvious good graces resulting from a more diverse writership, one not bound, say, to sufficiently

ivied universities or beholden to old money or to internships at the best presses, currying the favor of an aging senior editor soon headed for permanent horizontal. My own experience has given me reason to question the wolf warnings of honchos such as Joseph Epstein, a learned man who frets over the decline of poetry's high culture in his provocative essay "Who Killed Poetry?"[12] Poetry, it turns out, is alive, thank you, though surely its face is changing shape and color. America is a pluralistic society, composed of an increasingly ethnically diverse populace. This variety of voices and experiences must be heard if America is to speak for herself *as* herself.

Still, it can be infuriating to rake through the democratic haystack to find the authentic needle one's been searching for. There, the bloviators and the bloggers and the simply uninformed stand shoulder to shoulder with the expert and the well-skilled. Sorting them out is a full-time job in itself. Even my university students, whom I assumed would love the Wild West spirit of the Web, flinched at its chaos when researching poetry Web sites for a class project. These students, the voices of rebellion against authority, paradoxically yearned for some authority to stratify the good from the bad, to make their search more fruitful and, yes, a bit easier. Side by side: teenage Roberta's poetry blog, replete with saccharine-rhymed couplets for her poodle, and Robert Pinsky, he the translator of Dante and former U.S. poet laureate.

Most times sifting through this blather is time consuming but not injurious to one's learning or one's health. It's another matter entirely when the Internet milieu "collective intelligence" and "citizen journalism" dispense flawed or inaccurate information, as Andrew Keen notes in his *The Cult of the Amateur.* Keen calls such sites such as Wikipedia, YouTube, and the plethora of blogs a "dictatorship of idiots" drowning out the voices of expert and sage.[13] Wikipedia is a case in point. Even the esteemed *New Yorker* was victimized by one of Wikipedia's so-called experts, praising "Essjay," the author of some sixteen thousand Wikipedia entries, and describing him as holding "a Ph.D. in theology and a degree in canon law."[14] This "tenured professor of religion" told the *New Yorker* he devoted "fourteen hours a day" to the site and was routinely the object of death threats from overzealous Wikipedia users whose work he had corrected or challenged.[15] Cautiously, all this frantic dispensing and maintaining of the truth he had kept secret from "colleagues and friends."[16] No doubt he had. Turns out, the fellow is a twenty-four-year-old university dropout. Making matters worse, when con-

fronted with this truth, the site's cofounder Jimmy Wales is said to have spouted, "I don't really have a problem with it." So much for journalistic and editorial integrity. Later, perhaps after a trip to the woodshed with a bevy of adult accountants, bankers, and lawyers, Wales reconsidered and sacked Essjay.

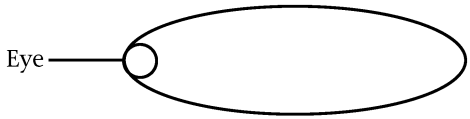
For the moment, egalitarian freedom stirs chaos that in turn ladles more disorder, thereby spoiling the soup for us all. For the moment, digitized media positions everyone as equally author and reader, everyone as equally actor and audience member. We crave to be seen and to be heard as a way to confirm our worth as human beings, and we need the new arts of the Internet to answer our hankerings. What's more, if we still we deem our "real" lives insufficiently scintillating, we can concoct and market an alternative personality owning more moxie and oozing sex appeal. For instance, via the Internet's "Second Life," one can create an alter ego and an entire substitute world for one's avatar to rule as he/she sees fit. Great mobs of young and old are said to engage in self-fabricated, digital whimsy worlds. In fact, it's said that real human beings make real money—enough to make a decent living—designing digital costumes for other folks' avatar characters. In this way an individual's fantasy life breeds a fantasy world that breeds someone's banking real money off both. To underscore the ways current technological culture both breeds and promises to ameliorate social anomie, one need only submit January–February 2007's 11.5 percent increase in visits to social-networking sites MySpace and Facebook. Digital social networking substitutes for actual society of real folks. There, we can count our "friends" not in the dozens but in the thousands who click and ask to be admitted to our circle. We eye them and they eye us, making us both real.

How do we sort through the chaff to find the wheat? As yet, Google does nothing to aid us in this quest, nor do sites such as Wikipedia that only blur the line between knowledge and sophistry. Let's hope the next versions of Google and other search engines effectively discriminate among levels of expertise and professionalism. Let's hope some judge enters the Internet's Wild West town and fashions a workable civility not obliged to irresponsible gunslingers or herds of brainless cattle.

One hopes the capitalistic future will produce a means of rewarding the knowledgeable and dismissing the hacks. If it means someone pockets money on the venture, bet on it.

5 / The Kingdom of the Eye and Our Polyfocal Attention

In digital video culture, the eye rules as both benevolent king and churlish despot. The visual has come to circumscribe the landscape of our aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional lives. In his *Tractatus,* Wittgenstein wisely notes that one can't see the periphery of one's world because one is in it. One can't step out of oneself to see oneself seeing. One can't look beyond oneself to look in on oneself looking. Wittgenstein considers this point so fundamental but thorny he even provides a sketch to illustrate the impossibility of this means of perception, an eye perceiving an eye-shaped world like this:[17]



Because film and video duplicate this view offered by the human eye, apparently replicating reality as we know it, the camera's eye readily becomes our own, both trustworthy and paradoxically seductive. The video camera's eye shows us the world we're accustomed to receiving through our own eye, so viewers forget the camera shows only what it wants us to see. This, of course, offers a key element of film's technique as aesthetic. Benjamin loathes the way viewers cede their own eyes to those of the cameraman. But in giving our eyes over to the camera, we experience what Benjamin admits is an "enriched . . . field of perception" through the use of close-ups, slow-motion, and other techniques not available to the human eye alone.[18] In effect, the new technology of art has delivered fresh modes of perception, as well as created within us the expectation of such enriched perception. The result: video technology has created within us new forms of visual awareness and thus generated desires that heretofore did not exist. Let's slow-mo a car crash, a baseball meeting an opened mitt, even the bullet piercing flesh.

In the home, our need for visual stimuli has expressed itself in the proliferation of TVs, where one TV begat two begat three begat four, every room wired for stereo sound. This necessarily includes bathroom and bedroom TVs, so even in our most intimate moments we need never be disconnected from our need to be connected. In similar fashion, one home computer

begat two home computers begat the laptop we can, if we wish, trundle with us everywhere, its fullest extension being the Internet-capable cell phone enabling us to carry our office (and the world) in our pockets. It has become a commonplace to say our homes are "wired" for more than electricity, but given recent technological leaps, it is more accurate to say our homes are becoming "wireless" for our ability to be connected without the constraints of power cord or transmission line. Paul Valéry foresaw this invasion of the attention-snatchers: "Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear or disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign."[19]

This movement of the hand indeed amounts to a kind of sign, a language of accessibility and dismissal. It is the language of the television remote and the cell phone text-message pad. It is the dialect of the thumb in action. It says *enter* and *be gone* with equal relish, characteristic of those possessing kingly power or those who'd like to think they do.

In our case, it is mostly the latter. For in surrounding ourselves with an increasing number of attention-snatchers, we may find ourselves decreasingly able to pay attention to any one thing for long. Collectively, have we become a generation of multitaskers, perhaps accomplishing a lot of little things in little time but finding ourselves bamboozled by the long project demanding an extended period of full attention? Sounding an alarmist siren, Maggie Jackson's *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* warns that various technological allures of contemporary culture now erode our fundamental ability to focus our attention. Multitasking is one boogie man, as Jackson asserts: "The addictive allure of multitasking people and things, our near-religious allegiance to a constant state of motion: these are markers of a land of distraction, in which our old conceptions of space, time, and place have been shattered." We wander the brightly lit path of electronic temptations, flitting from email to voice mail to YouTube, and thus risk losing what Jackson describes as our "capacity as a society for deep, sustained focus."[20] Nicholas Carr's feature article in the *Atlantic*—"Is Google Making Us Stupid?"—blames the Internet and the brain-rotting, high-sugar efficiency of Google for "chipping away" his aptitude for "concentration and contemplation."[21] He complains of his fresh inability to enjoy the kind of "deep reading" and sustained meditation that formerly enabled him to draw inferences and make associations. In essence, Carr mourns the loss of his capability to

ponder a subject. Of Carr's lament, one may remark that it is encouraging, if perhaps unintendedly so, that he was able to marshal sufficient concentration to compose a lengthy rumination on his lack of concentration. Perhaps the effects he bemoans are more superficial than real, or perhaps more transitory than lasting, but still Carr admits feeling the effect I've noted: that use of digital technology is "remapping the neural circuitry" of his brain.[22]

This digital rewiring of the brain, Dr. Gary Small suggests, affects not only one how one works individually but also how one relates to other human beings. Small, in his book *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind,* argues that too great of an immersion in Internet and smartphone technology causes the individual to lose face-to-face social skills such as the ability to read facial expressions during conversation. In turn, the inability to interpret nonverbal messages may lead to social awkwardness and thus to social isolation, especially in those "digital natives" who have been raised since birth in a digital world. Acknowledging that he lacks a definitive case for his claims, Small believes it's nonetheless a good idea to work with those at both ends of the digital spectrum—sharpening digital natives' social skills while improving the technological dexterity of older folks less familiar with electronic modes.

To say we are distracted is not altogether on target, despite the blooming orchard of ADD and ADHD diagnoses. Perhaps contemporary digital video culture has itself occasioned a new configuration of neurons rewarding multiple-and-brief rather than singular-and-prolonged attention. Living in a state of "continual partial attention," as former Microsoft techno-geek Linda Stone describes it, makes distraction itself a mode of attention. In a world bombarding us with innumerable stimuli at every waking moment, patient contemplation might well come to be seen as unnecessary if not self-defeating.

Distraction as a mode of aesthetic attention explains the way many of us receive art nowadays. Distraction has fostered what I call "polyfocal attention"—paying partial attention to a plethora of things at once. Or is it "polyfocal distraction," one's attention suffering the distractions of a multitude of things simultaneously? Or might it be "polyfocal-attention-distraction," a state in which lines mute between paying attention and being distracted? My college-aged daughter—mature, articulate, and techno-savvy—stands as a case in point. Like most twenty-two-year-olds, Kirsten displays what to me is an amazing capacity to filter multiple stimuli and yet

retain the ability to act on each of them with surprising efficiency. Here's Benjamin on the subject: "The distracted person, too, can form habits. More, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their solution has become a matter of habit."[23] To illustrate this point, I need only adduce an emblematic scene. Her typical night involves simultaneously talking on the land phone line, watching a TV program, listening to music on her iPod, instant-messaging friends on the computer, and texting friends with her cell. In that mix may well fall studying for a chemistry exam or writing a philosophy paper. This ability, not uncommon among her compatriots, characterizes her generation at large. In fact, the 2007 NEA report "To Read or Not to Read" cites a study indicating 58 percent of United States seventh- through twelfth-grade students use other media while reading "most" or "some" of the time. Not surprisingly, the two largest culprits are watching TV (11 percent) and listening to music (10 percent), but the list of distractions students welcome during reading also includes playing video games, emailing, surfing Web sites, and instant messaging.[24]

While time and use will reveal the qualitative results of polyfocal attention for us and for our children, a cadre of scientists and psychologists has already begun to research the subject—resulting in the usual armloads of papers reaching conflicting conclusions. After scanning the brains of eighteen- to forty-five-year-olds who were bombarded with audible beeps while trying to learn flash cards, UCLA's Russell Poldrack and other scientists there posit, "Multitasking adversely affects how you learn." Learning while multitasking, they suggest, leads to learning that is "less flexible and more specialized, so you cannot retrieve the information as easily." David Meyer of the University of Michigan argues that kids learning while multitasking simply learn "to be skillful at superficial learning." To the contrary, Clifford Nass of Stanford finds multitaskers do indeed allow in more potentially distracting information but seem able to store that information in short-term memory and "keep it separated into what they need and what they don't." They seem curiously able to pan the informational gold from the slurry, thus mysteriously compensating for distraction while processing what most matters.[25]

Thus, it's possible to put a more positive spin on this matter, suggesting a change of habits indicates a corollary alteration in the multitaskers' abilities and perhaps as well a transformation of their brains' physiology. One suspects this cadre of skills likely results from rewiring of the digital generation's individual and collective brains, a type of specialized neurogen-

esis occasioned by immersion in a sea of digital multitasking experiences. Perhaps Benjamin was right all along about the mind's ability to adapt and thus to "master certain tasks" while surrounded by distraction.

In *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future,* Mark Bauerlein laments Gen Y's inability, or disinclination, to accumulate nuggets of knowledge—for our purposes, let's say the name of the author of *A Modern Instance,* our country's first major novel to broach the then-indelicate subject of divorce. He sees the matter as a sign of cultural disintegration. One wonders why, given the worldwide pervasiveness of digital culture, Bauerlein argues only American youth are headed to hell in a digital handbasket. In doing so, Bauerlein, well intentioned and well read, confuses knowing things—rote memorization—with knowing where to find out things (i.e., trolling search engines such as Google). But is such knowledge the same thing as the capacity to think? Probably not. Moreover, as commentators Begley and Interlandi note, since the 1930s, IQ scores, which measure thinking capacity, have steadily risen in all countries using the test to gauge intelligence. So the kids are not, strictly speaking, getting dumber. Who was that American novelist? William Dean Howells.

Despite the Chicken-Littleism of books suggesting digital culture is destroying our youth, maybe, after all, the kids *are* all right, as The Who loudly pronounced while destroying their instruments on stage in what Pete Townsend called "pop art auto destruction."[26]

6 / Immediacy, Velocity, and Simultaneity

The characteristics listed earlier delineate the much-desired and thereby representative qualities of contemporary life. These define the ways we interact with our world, and they in turn define our artful representations of that world's experiences. Having breeched the threshold of mechanical reproduction of art, the artist has further accelerated that process since the introduction of digital reproduction. These technological advances—giving us capabilities we did not previously possess—have created new human desires for what was not heretofore available. Technology, as usual, has erased distinctions between want and need. We *want* to see and to be seen across the globe, to hear and to be heard simply because now we can. The pervasiveness and pertinacity of that individual-cum-social desire have become perilously confused with need.

Recent developments with cell phone technology present a similar irony. Increasingly, the cell phone is becoming the platform for delivery of artistic content. One can download, store, and play music, as well as a growing library of film and television video. Smart phones boast Internet accessibility, opening, depending on one's view, either the vast blue heavens or the sordid wasteland of the World Wide Web in one's sweaty palm. Now, given the agency of a cellular telephone, not only has the home become infiltrated with digital technological reproduction, but so also has one's person. One might say we are never-not-connected, which is not to say we are genuinely connecting with the surfeit of images, sounds, and messages entering our sensory portals. The compulsion is so seductive that once one receives the cell phone's first kiss, one can't imagine ever being without it. Ever. It goes with us everywhere, even into the restroom.

Witness how many cell phones, slipping out of a pocket or off the belt, find a watery grave in the toilet. The image is apt, for many would say that's exactly where digital culture is taking us—into the toilet. Faced with the dilemma of losing one's connectivity or reaching one's hand into one's own waste, it's instructive to note how many of us fish out that cell phone, thinking we've saved it and us. Befouled, we are shamed—then doubly so, when we learn what havoc water wreaks on digital circuitry. One might well suspect there's a camera phone video of someone caught in this dilemma, an irony underscoring its postmodern absurdity. We are watched, watching. Watching ourselves watched. In such a world, with nearly every instant subject to being sound recorded or filmed, our attention to the moment is both heightened and deadened. If every moment is epic, none truly is.

The everywhereness of art, or what many consider to be artful, has altered both the creation and the reception of art. Immediacy is its characteristic notion. Benjamin posits a key element of art "has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later."[27] I say the same holds true for technology. Technology creates demand that is fully satisfied only as new technology evolves to meet that new desire. Both film and photography created the "demand" for action and simultaneity that could be met only with the later invention of digital technology and its means of immediate, far-reaching distribution. Velocity is its primary agent. Immediacy and velocity of delivery proffer a drunken-sailor, vertiginous experience of simultaneity. Everything happens at once, seemingly without sequence.

One time-tested goal of poetry is to negotiate that velocity and to fash-

ion order out of chaos. Poetry operates by connecting readers to opposing notions of flux and stasis. In the process, poetry creates the appearance of one to produce the other. A poem has to move if it is to be thought of as moving, as intellectually and emotionally transportative. But a poem also has to lend itself to the polar experience of landing one's feet on revelation, what Frost called a "momentary stay against confusion." Momentary, indeed.

7 / The Poem as Work of Art in an Age of Digital Reproduction

Given this discussion, what lies ahead for American poetry in this digital age? Let's address the pessimistic possibilities head-on. Over time, poetry in book form has lost the "aura" Benjamin believed accompanied poets' speaking their words in ritual or tribal ceremony. Poets are, Dana Gioia suggests, "priests in a town of agnostics," earning some vestigial respect but not much cultural agency.[28] Within the past 150 years, poetry has seen its place at the height of social arts slip with the emergence of the novel, as the novel has likewise since given way to film and to various modes of popular music. Yes, many in our culture are less likely to quote T. S. Eliot than to chatter movie dialogue or chortle hip-hop lyrics. And one might unfavorably compare the statistical probability of finding a citizen on the street who can quote William Wadsworth Longfellow, 150 years after the death of America's last universally beloved poet, against the likelihood of finding someone at the mall who can spout a few lines from Tupac or John Lennon.

As chapter 1 attests, American poetry currently displays yet another petulant iteration of its century-long bifurcation. It's not exactly the "Beats and the Slicks," as poet James Wright labeled the opposing camps of Beat and academic poets in the 1950s, but the split's terms remain familiar even as technology offers new ways to manifest aesthetic polarization. One version pits polar opposites preaching for well-behaved accessible verse against those on the other end relishing poetic qualities of difficulty, experimentation, and indeterminacy. This bifurcation widens even more notably when one considers the parallel aesthetic chasm between print-centered poets and those pursuing digital, computer-based poetries, as the following chapter details.

Raising poetry's national media presence is thus especially thorny when its major parties disagree as to whether poetry really needs or truly benefits from broad public saturation. The accessible brand of American poetry yearns to reestablish a broad, general readership for poetry, not unlike the

nineteenth-century variety that gave us the newspaper poets. On the other hand, the opposing camp professes to keep poetry pure by maintaining—perhaps accentuating—its marginal status. In a December 2006 *New York Times Book Review* piece, Joel Brower, in fact, praises poetry's supposed lack of wide audience as "poetry's good fortune"—suggesting a paucity of mass market means American poetry faces "no call to pander." The concern is that poetry is cheapened by the quest for public audience, especially if this quest is attended by dumb-downed versification. What, then, is one to make of the star status afforded poets in many European and Latin American nations? Are those poets shameful, mass-culture sellouts?

Often overlooked in this discussion are performance, spoken-word, and Slam poets, those who long for (and often achieve) both wider audience and social relevance. They welcome technological advancements of audio and video recording to achieve those ends. Marc Smith, for instance, has fashioned the poetry slam into a cross-cultural poetic happening in many American cities and universities, and the slam movement is increasingly gaining international momentum. On the Web the venerable sites "Poetry Daily" and "Verse Daily" afford print-based poetry a reasonable presence, registering the tens of thousands of daily hits necessary to give poetry a discernible national online pulse. In addition, numerous Internet sites such as the University of Buffalo's Electronic Poetry Center feature innovative digital poetries of all stripes. Poetry, modern media's stepchild, has indeed languished off screen for the most part, but TV*'s Def Poetry Jam* and MTV's *Unplugged* series have successfully appealed to young viewers for whom poetry is both relevant and hip. A couple other TV poetry ventures warrant mentioning, one for its aesthetic conservatism—Bill Moyers's PBS series *The Language of Life* (a look at mostly conventional poets and poetics)—and the other for its multicultural and often strident sociopolitical attitudes—Bob Holman's *The United States of Poetry* (an overview of those poets mostly *outside* of the network of so-called official verse closeted in university-supported creative writing programs).[29] The former gave soccer moms a sanitized poetry suitable for polite home reading, while the latter churned up lace-ruffling issues of homosexuality, homelessness, and racial anger. Perhaps neither succeeded in installing poetry as a major player within televised culture, but these ventures asserted the resiliency and relevance of poetry's public appeal.

In sum, I'd wager there's cause for modest optimism. How does one account for the undeniable reality that

- well over three thousand poetry books are printed each year
- innumerable clubs and poetry societies and workshops abound across the land
- summer writers' workshops thrive in considerable numbers
- a seemingly unstinted proliferation of university MFA and low-residency MFA programs cater to ever-growing parades of traditional and nontraditional creative writing students
- a plethora of Web sites gather and present both video and new media poetries for digital consumption via computer
- video and new media poetries abound on YouTube, Facebook, and the like
- and a burbling gaggle of literary journals survives in print and online?

Despite the odds, public appreciation for poetry has survived aboveground-underground, if you will, flourishing below the radar of national media and the purveyors of broad-scale cultural enterprise.

What's more, literary reading among the populace has enjoyed a notable rebirth within the past decade. For the first time in the twenty-six-year history of the NEA's periodic survey of Americans' reading habits, overall reading rates both for adults and for eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds have risen instead of declined. Though each rate hovers distressingly just above the midpoint—50.2 percent for all adults and 51.7 percent for eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds—the increase in readers aged eighteen to twenty-four who read novels, stories, and poetry has turned around from a 20 percent decline in 2002 to a startling 21 percent increase in 2008. Even more encouraging is the generalized uptick in reading rates across racial lines among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics. Enjoying a 20 percent increase in readers since 2002, Hispanics have tallied the sharpest climb, with reading among African Americans levitating 15 percent. Although adult reading rates still languish behind 1982 levels, literary reading among all American adults grew by 7 percent between 2002 and 2008, after twenty years of steady declines.[30]

My own experience with public poetic outreach suggests there's a surprisingly pervasive social yearning for poetry. As Illinois poet laureate, traveling the state's rural roads and urban streets to offer in four years' time well over one hundred school visits, public library poetry readings, nursing home

presentations, radio interviews, and the like, I have found palpable craving for the heightened contemplation poetry both offers to and requires of its readers. Poetry rewards patience, asking for attention both to the part and to the whole. Even though poetry seldom cracks the major media venues, its magnetic pull permeates wide strata of American society from our youth to the blue-haired set.

Given the hierarchy of aesthetic experience, and notwithstanding my qualms about the quality of the artistic experience engaged via computer, television, or Internet, I wonder if this quite different (perhaps inferior) experience of art is better than none at all. What do we poets, wrapped in unsullied robes of the uncorrupted, achieve for our art form by relegating its conveyance to outdated modes?

Poetry has always been largely about performance and "voice"—and digital technology proffers new methods to embody and convey both, ways that curiously reassert a measure of "aura" inherent in the performativity of human voice. Let us acknowledge the truth of a hierarchy of aesthetic encounters with art. Let us also admit the validity of Benjamin's equating *proximity* with *intimacy* when it comes to some human encounters with original art. Let us agree as well for some arts *proximal distance* can impact *aesthetic distance.* Agreement on these matters, however, does not imply all alternative means of delivering and receiving art are without merit or consequence. Instead, for those not in the physical presence of the original art or the artist, let us investigate innovative ways to inhabit an artistic work.

It's long been known the brain is malleable, subject to structural change brought on by our experiences and practices. The area of the brain devoted to individual tasks, say, playing the guitar, increases with utilization. Beyond that, human beings are no longer regarded as subject to what Norman Doidge calls "neurological nihilism" in his book *The Brain That Changes Itself* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007)—the sense that well before kindergarten one's brain is permanently set in form and function. Now it is commonly believed that the brain can rewire itself, and our experiences have a hand in that rewiring. Our abilities, at least as the brain is concerned, are not predetermined and unalterable, so it's not far-fetched to imagine the growth of our brain's capacity to enjoy art forms that come to us via newfangled digital means. This need not be the death of art as we know it. Rather, it offers an expanded if altered way of creating and receiving that art.

Suffice it to say, if technology has created new ways for humans to experi-

ence an ancient art like poetry, poetry must adapt or risk going the way of the dodo bird and the eight-track player. Mercilessly killed off, not even a single, stuffed bird exists to show the masses what once roamed those islands. Only a sere dodo head and one bony foot remain, stored on the back shelves of an Oxford museum. Once state-of-the-art technology, the eight-track has itself become a museum piece, an object of techno-derision or stoney nostalgia. One of these was a creature of creation, the other a mode of distribution and reception. Both are now irrelevant except as object lessons. Poets and our dusty poetry books take heed.

Though one may harbor reservations about mode of delivery, can one reasonably argue to sustain the art in any meaningful way by refusing to publish online, to digitally record poetry, to Web-broadcast poetic events, and to experiment with electronic, computer-based poetries? In the desire to keep poetry pure—purely bookish—would we not be falling upon our swords—and impaling poetry as well? Remember, the book was once the iPod of its generation.

8 / Offerings with a Shaker of Salt

Poets must *supplement* not necessarily replace current modes of literary delivery and reception. I do not wail mournfully for the book's fast-approaching demise. I heard those shrieks of doom twenty-five years ago on the cusp of the digital age. To this day books and (corporate) booksellers are doing rather well. Yes, the book's format will unavoidably evolve, but for the moment there's a sensuous indulgence about the book, a tactile delight uniquely linked to the intellectual and emotional pleasures that give the book itself the cachet of a bottle of wine, a cup of coffee, a good cigar. It's both tangible and otherworldly; it's portable and yet boundless. There's something about the book's scented pages and the texture of its cover, something about its art and copy, that has survived even the bookseller's insinuation of the bar code upon its back cover. In short, the book's wholesale evolution into a widely accepted newfangled digital form is inevitable but not imminent.

Still, poets must also satisfy contemporary audiences' fresh "demand" for aural and video experiences. How? They can do so by applying the new digital technologies that have fed these very desires within the larger public. They can do so by representing the broad pluralism of voices and aesthetics, of modes and manners, characteristic of contemporary poetry's vibrant

mélange. They can do so as means of connecting poetry to its ancient roots in song, dance, and music. Finally, they can do so without resorting to watered-down poetry or a bland milquetoast of accessible verse.

If poets can entice individuals to experience print-based poetry via digitized means or to encounter electronic poetry's new media forms, perhaps those same folks will return to poetry for the pleasures found in a book. In doing so, they may be seduced into sophisticated and nuanced study. If poetry wishes to reach outside the academic community, here's how to start.

1. *Give poetry readings.* "Groovy" in the sixties, the poetry reading has worn well over the years for reasons Benjamin would attribute to maintenance of the art's "aura" in the body and voice of the poet. The venue is real and alive, and the audience's experience of art is both collective and individual. Poetry readings offer an intimate and proximal encounter with art that—in an ideal blend of poet, poetry, location, and audience—may well rise to the hierarchal pinnacle of aesthetic encounters.

2. *Enhance the reading's setting and performance by including other art forms.* In essence, satisfy a digital audience's desire for variety and immediacy of artistic experience. Give them something that engages their emerging polyfocal attention. Arrange for live music to be performed before the reading while the audience settles in, as the North Central College jazz band did before my reading there. Display visual art in the venue, adding a blend of artistic performance, as public libraries around the state have done. Doing so mingles the various arts into one larger artistic experience for the audience. Doing so also highlights ways one art form often steals from another in service of its own expanded expression, something I fondly call "artistic kleptomania."

3. *Remember we inhabit the Kingdom of the Eye and the Realm of the Ear.* Expose oneself to fresh poetic forms utilizing the computer screen as opposed to the printed page—varieties of so-called video poetry, e-poetry, Cin(E-)Poetry, rich.lit, Web.art, and so on. These experimental new media poetries blend word, image, sound, and music within the poetic act, as the following chapter discusses at length. These forms may reasonably complement not eradicate traditional print-based forms.

Consider as well my children's sage advice regarding the allure of audio and video: "Our generation worships video and sound. If we first *hear* a poem or *see* the poet reading it, we're more likely to spend time alone reading that poem." In curious but undeniable fashion, people become deeply

invested in poems they hear or see the poet read. Use the Internet's digital audio and video resources to enable this outcome, as well as the audio CD or other digital formats. I can't begin to count the number of times I've heard an audience member with even a passing interest in poetry remark, "I understood your poem better when I heard you read it aloud." In this way the poet returns poetry to its aural origins in song, dance, and music. In spite of the centuries-old ascendancy of poetry in written form, due to the then-new technology of the printing press, poetry is best a mode of auditory performance and reception. This notion leads directly to the following proposal.

4. *Employ contemporary poetry audio and video in classrooms.* One salutary effect of audio and video poetry amounts to bringing before the audience examples of poems written during the audience's own lifetime. Most who don't read contemporary poetry simply don't expect to find *Wheel of Fortune,* global warming, Kanye West, *South Park,* and Mozart in a poem, let alone in the same piece, as one is likely to do reading many contemporary poems. Most nonreaders of poetry conjure up unpleasant school memories of clotted poems rife with hidden meanings they could never uncover to their teachers' satisfactions. Many of America's poetry classrooms have never jettisoned the nineteenth century's fetish for moral didacticism and goo-goo-googly sentimentality. A poem's meaning is cudgeled onto students' lumpy heads to the exclusion of celebrating its pleasures of music, rhythm, humor, and verbal play. Some poems' *meaning* can be understood only as *pleasure.*

Most students don't have the opportunity to hear a poet read her/his poem in person, perhaps the highest-level poetic experience, and they've yet to learn the gratification of reading a poem alone in solitary contemplation, an aesthetic experience often equal to hearing a poet reading her/his works live. Therefore, introducing students weaned on MTV, iPods, and YouTube to the domain of art via audio or video poetry may well open them to an entirely new realm of artistic appreciation. It may entice them to read poems more carefully and with greater enjoyment. They may discover, to their astonishment, that "poetry doesn't have to suck," as one student announced to me with epiphanic verve.

In this spirit, I edited *Bread & Steel* (http://www.bradley.edu/breadandsteel), an audio CD anthology of twenty-four Illinois poets reading from their works. The CD gathers together poets of various voices, modes of delivery, and levels of reputation. The goal was to place the CD into as many Illinois classrooms and libraries as possible, heightening the chances a knowing

teacher might deliver students to just this sort of epiphany. In addition, two laureate sites (http://www.poetlaureate.il.gov and http://www.bradley.edu/poet) offer a score of contemporary poems both in text and in digital audio performance, each represented by a separate icon. Site visitors can choose the manner in which they want to experience the poems—whether first via text and then by audio or, more commonly, by listening to and reading the poem's text simultaneously. The same option holds for the digital video poetry selections, some recorded before a live audience (my preference) and others filmed alone. Site visitors most often view the video of the poet's reading his/her poem, then read the poem's text while listening to (and sometimes glancing at) the poet's audio-video performance.

5. *Reacquaint oneself and others with the power of poetry's oral performance via recordings.* The book has long held sway as the dominant mode of receiving verse. Once the sore-handed scribe gave way to the printer, the book was cutting-edge. Consider the centuries-long effects of technological creep. One can surely imagine ancient and medieval oral poets bemoaning the injurious effects of poems presented in print rather than spoken in person by the poet before a clan, tribe, or chosen audience. One can hear their complaints about poetry's demise brought on by the dry pages of technology's then-new darling—the book. Reading is, above all else, a learned activity. Humans adapted to the book's once-pioneering technology to such a degree it's now the current gold standard. Given digital culture's apparent rewiring of the brain or at the very least its reshaping of human desires, is it too far-fetched to say audio technology may resuscitate interest in the aural pleasures of poetry?

It has for Sue, the middle-aged assistant office manager of my village's U.S. post office serving the 950 good citizens of Dunlap, Illinois. Recently, Sue informed me she'd downloaded a couple of my poems from a recent NPR interview and placed them on her iPod. There, on the alphabetical playlist, not far from Kiss and Kenny Loggins, is my reading of "On Being a Nielsen Family." Ponder that over your morning coffee.

6. *Co-opt the very audio/video technology that would at first glance seem to sound poetry's death knell.* New technology can s*upplement* not *replace* the book as means of delivering poetry to its audience. Poets and presses should make common the practice of publishing poetry collections in both text and audio versions simultaneously, so one form complements the other. Short of that, give readers something good to hear if not to read. Satisfy the public's appetite for hearing poets recite their own poems. At the very least, presses'

and journals' Web sites ought to contain both audio and video poetry by a range of their contributors. The once-stodgy *Poetry* boasts a Web site replete with such selections, a veritable poetry cornucopia: http://www.poetryfoundation.org.

7. *Pay attention to the growing popularity of "spoken word" poetry and "performance" poets* whose "readings" are not really readings at all. Instead of politely reading from a text, these poets recite their poems in spontaneous, sometimes partially ad-libbed performances that often include the audience's participating by echoing refrains or response phrases. Yes, these events can be just as ruinous for their over-the-topness as those snore-inducing readings by Pulitzer winners whose noses cleave to their books' half-inch gutter. But keep in mind that in ancient Rome the accepted mode for "publishing" one's poetry was to read it before a group.

Performance and spoken word poetry may offer a welcome alternative to the poetics of bifurcation discussed earlier. In essence, it problematizes the division of our poetry into poles of mannerly, accessible verse on one hand and verbally playful poetry of indeterminacy on the other. Doing so, it draws elements from both camps—offering one clique's firm belief in audience and the other's linguistic liveliness. Of course, one tires of the predictable sniping between performance and so-called academic poets of all stripes. Excesses on both sides nauseate those who are equally for words and for their apt performance. Perhaps a more efficacious approach is to investigate diversity of presentation within an ancient art form that surely would benefit from blending of tradition and innovation, the aesthetic tug of war underwriting all meaningful artistic evolution.

In sum, our task is to find ways for technology's speed and omnipresence to conspire against themselves in favor of art. In that way we readers discover means to contemplate the poem in our own time and at our own measure, no matter the flux and chaos our world washes over us. Those of us who appreciate a poem's weird magic also understand poetry's true powers actually are not dissimilar from that of the *Star Trek* transporter. Reading a good poem, or hearing it recited, we are ecstatically transported to new realms of awareness and fresh ways of seeing. This lurch outside the self is as pleasurable as the musical language that occasions transport. As an art form, poetry both recognizes and depends upon its powers for delivering immediacy, velocity, and simultaneity. After all, the poem's ecstatic instant—itself engendered by contemplation—is founded on these principles.

CHAPTER 7

A Digital Poetry Play*list*

Varieties of Video and New Media Poetries

The advent of digital technology has given birth to video and new media poetries both created on and received via the computer. Each bristles with revolutionary fervor. These electronic progeny aspire to resuscitate poetry not only by expressing the moment's dizzying array of word, image, and sound but also by thrusting verse culture into new potentialities of awareness. Still, there's much disagreement about how digital poetry forwards such ends. Brian Kim Stefans and Tom O'Connor suggest the qualities that distinguish new media poetry exist as much in the poetry itself as in the technology by which it is conveyed to readers, whether the mode is page- or computer-based. Others such as Adalaide Morris contend digital verse itself fosters meaningful interchange between oppositional discourses of the old-school print-based lyric and the newfangled programmable poem. Still others such as Loss Pequeno Glazier believe emergent electronic poetics extend Modernist and Concrete poets' prior experiments with print-centered poetry. Wide-eyed, Glazier imagines the electronic realm as poetry's true home in the twenty-first century, elevating its digital modes as means not to complement but rather to supplant print-centered verse as poetry's ultimate "space of poesis."[1]

Again, artistic evolution's pendulum swings into play—a matter discussed at length in chapter 1—but this time fresh forces have been set in motion. Traditional "academic" verse here finds itself challenged not by the habitual insurrections of radical page-oriented poetries but by innovative expressions of computer-based poetry.[2] In this instance, the issue is not so much the usual aesthetic wrangling over what printed-text poems say and

the manner in which they say it. Rather, the matter is more finely a question of *how,* via new technologies, poems come to be conceived and embodied by the poet as well as *how* they come to be received by contemporary audiences.

The computer screen's emergence as site for making and distributing poetry tests the public's unquestioned, five-hundred-year-old acceptance of the materiality of the printed page, asking bookworms to rethink the very terms of the reading act. For many practitioners and proponents, digital technology represents the twenty-first century's verse alchemy, its transformative agent and its ineluctable future. In their view, the poem as printed-word artifact gives way to the poem as alchemic blend of word, image, sound, and motion displayed by means of the screen's kinetic materiality. The poem's literal and figurative "space" has therefore transitioned from the confines of the printed page to a purely digital realm. There, the word mingles with filmic and technological expressions to create fresh poetic language. Electronic poetry is thus occasioning expanded definitions of just what a poem is and what it might become. In short, the new mode's rebel prince has arrived on the scene to contest and perhaps dethrone art's monarchial aesthetic geezer.

Poetry Is Dead. Long Live Poetry.

The context for this rebellious rebirth invokes both familiar funereal metaphors for the "old" poetry and hyperbolic birth announcements of the "new." While informed readers have rightfully become inured to yet another declaration of poetry's morbidity, this time terms of the art's demise have been narrowed. It is not *all* poetry that has assumed proverbial room temperature but merely the old-fashioned variety now dominating academic verse's book and journal scene. Friedrich Kittler, for example, solemnly clangs the "death bell" *only* for printed-text poetry as a central, functioning, social art form in his important *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter.*[3] What shall take its place? Loss Pequeno Glazier posits that poetry's salvific ship appears via the "making of poetry" founded "on a matrix of new shores": "From hypertext to visual/kinetic text to writing in networked and programmable media, there is a tangible feel of arrival in the spelled air."[4] Glazier's flamboyant poetic metaphor exudes the palpable excitement and sense of play one encounters in the creative work and criticism of new media poetry commentators. In

meaningful ways, the notion of "play" is rooted in electronic poetry's wires, bits, programs, languages, images, and codings. Much of this poetry ascribes to the belief that poetry *is* play that nonetheless carries serious, consequential implications. In fact, one cannot rightly be said to *read* many of these works, as one merely pushes the play button to set them in motion, often then interacting with and entering their spaces by clicking the computer's mouse as a mode of play itself. In e-literature's fondness for image as well as wordplay, for sound as well as silence, one encounters a multisensory form that one *plays* as one would a film or an iPod and that one interacts with as one would a game. Such fooling around evokes in poet and reader the self-sufficient joy of reshuffling the perceptual deck of cards one has been handed by previous reading.

Playing Poetry

Inclusive rather than exclusive, this chapter addresses two complementary categories of electronic poetry that heretofore have not been discussed side by side. It's curious that previous commentaries have neglected to assert and examine the common heritage of these forms:

1. Video Poetry
   - Docu-video-poetry
   - Filmic poetry/Cin(E)-Poetry

2. New Media Poetry
   - Fixed-text, computer-based poetry
   - Alterable-text electronic poetry
   - Collaborative/participatory media poetry

Each digital poetry mode makes use of technology to varying degrees and with varying purposes, even within these loose categories. One useful way to position these various electronic expressions is to articulate ways these poetries extend or reject the aesthetic qualities of traditional page-based verse to which they presumably respond. In short, given the aesthetic history that precedes them, these poetries are defined as much by what they don't do as by what they do. These poetries' relationships with the current dominant mode of the printed page thus can be figured by constructing a

set of sliding-scale metrics. The measures following range from the left pole's conventional aesthetic assumptions to the right pole's set of contrasting principles favored by e-poets:

Printed-Page Poetry	**Video/New Media Poetry**
⊨Investment in a single authorial "I" . . .⟷. . .	Acceptance of polyvocal expressions⊨
⊨Insistence on single authorship . . .⟷. . .	Preference for collaborative authorship⊨
⊨Fidelity to fixed, unchanging text . .⟷. .	Pursuit of nomadic, changeable text⊨
⊨Reliance on closed textual page . .⟷. .	Dependence on readers' participatory input⊨
⊨Loyalty to page's performative space . .⟷. .	Fondness for computer screen/gallery site⊨

In practical ways this schema informs my ensuing discussion of video and new media poetries. For the neophyte fresh to the scene, these measures serve ably as an introduction to the aesthetic theory undergirding electronic poetry. Using such scales also enables the more sophisticated reader to acknowledge e-poetry's real variety as well as the breadth of difference among its heterodox positions. In fact, some digital poetries can be shown, as we shall see later in this chapter, to share qualities with the page-based forms they ostensibly reject.

Corralling Digital Poetry's Wild Horses

Such a variety of video and new media forms has evolved—and continues to advance—that erecting an overarching definition for these digital poetics proves to be unwieldy. The slew of names that users and critics employ to describe these modes provides ample evidence of the multitude of forms spilling from this digital cornucopia: hypertext, cyberpoetry, Cin(E)-Poetry, cybertext, net.art, click poetry, rich.lit, Web.art, technotext, e-poetry, and so on. In fact, strict adherents to one e-lit form may deny another e-lit form's legitimacy as a digital mode. Seeking an umbrella classification, one tends therefore to focus less on the particulars of execution and more on the general reliance on technology permeating these various approaches. Talan Memmott, practitioner and critic of digital forms, proffers an appropriately inclusive definition: "that the object in question be 'digital,' mediated through digital technology, and that it be called 'poetry' by its author or by a critical reader."[5] Such expansive definition highlights the eventual product as much as the source and process of its creation—which is to say, under this

classification, one may start with printed text and then transform, enhance, enlarge, and reimagine it into digital expression.

This characterization, however, fails to satisfy digital purists such as N. Katherine Hayles. Hayles, an acute proponent/critic of electronic literature, contends that e-lit is "generally considered to exclude print literature that has been digitized." Her definition of electronic literature limits the field to works that are "digital born," that is, a "first generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer."[6] In doing so, Hayles definitively rejects print-lit given new digital expression, but she also—by stipulating computer reception—privileges the computer screen over large-scale gallery digital installation works that occupy a space considerably more expansive. So thorny is the topic that the Electronic Literature Organization saw fit to convene a committee to come up with a viable definition. Here's what resulted: "work with an important literary aspect that takes advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer."[7] This kind of taxonomic nitpicking demonstrates the difficulty of finding a workable definition that remains open to the multiplicity of digital poetries.

The Institutional Scene

What's astounding, although perhaps not surprising, is the fashion in which this revolution is taking place almost completely unseen beneath the (upturned?) noses of traditional, academic poetry circles. Most normative university creative writing programs have, either by artistic choice or by simple inattention, set themselves against the digital poetics challenging their disciplinary authority. Many university creative writing instructors—most of them poets themselves—blithely reject the terms of this challenge, and still others linger sleepily incognizant of their supremacy's being contested at all. Only a select few Language poets, chief among them Ron Silliman and Charles Bernstein, have drifted onto Glazier's "matrix of new shores." And Bernstein is perhaps the exception that proves the rule, as he's also comfortably ensconced in academe as professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. The bulk of major players in the digital poetry world are, as Alan Filreis puts it, "productively unaffiliated with the academy."[8] Inside the academy, poets interested in new media poetry look not to fellow members of the creative writing faculty or even to the radical theorists among

their English Department colleagues. Instead, they wander the hallways of Instructional Technology departments, digital hat in hand, hoping for chance encounter with a computer programmer or multimedia maven who takes kindly to the notion of poetry as an admixture of digital word, image, and sound.

My own case maps the relevant academic terrain. When I, as print-based poet, developed an interest in exploring the potential of digital poetic expression, not a single departmental colleague even vaguely knew what I was talking about. What's more, when I cast a line among other university-based poets, many of them big fish in academic poetry's smallish pond, I got nary a nibble. None of the dozen I approached had the least inkling that the field existed. Digital poetry looms beyond the periphery of their attention and thus outside the borders of what they consider to be poetic art. Most of them shrunk from me as if I'd professed to sell my poetic soul to the digital devil, to the computer, for heaven's sake.

That's because print poets look paradoxically upon the personal computer, gazing Janus-like upon the quaint analog past while simultaneously squinting into an abstruse digital future. On a working level, page poets view the computer as a tool akin to the pencil—albeit one offering more subtle word-processing capabilities than the mere eraser. To them, the computer amounts to a dutiful, voiceless slave that faithfully processes the poet's oeuvre. Click it on, click it off—in this way poets imagine themselves masters of technology. On a more esoteric plane, many poets simultaneously regard the computer as an embodiment of our silly, shallow, crass, and hopelessly commodified world that values poetry less than YouTube or a long-life battery. Tellingly, many poets not-so-secretly fear the computer is actually *their* master, a demigod whose technologies elude and thus control them. The results of this intellectual tug of war are notable and lingering. While I harbor my own reservations about technology, none of my traditional-poet friends regards new media creations even to be loosely poetic, let alone considers such expression to constitute a poem. The single university faculty member who entertained the idea of collaborating on some sort of media poem was James Ferolo, director of the school's multimedia program. And to be honest, he first responded to me guardedly, suspiciously eyeing me as a spy behind the lines of his digital kingdom.

Admittedly, to the printed-page classicist and digital tenderfoot, much e-poetry can seem merely vacuous or oddly ostentatious, a kind of electronic

showing-off that valorizes not the poem but the process by which it comes into being. Marjorie Perloff, herself no adversary to the movement, cogently summarizes this view by suggesting much digital poetry today seems "to fetishize digital presentation as something in itself remarkable, as if to say, 'Look at what the computer can do.'"[9] In sum, I suggest one should resist canonizing the digital in favor of the poetry it is meant to embody and express. One should guard against substituting the vanity of antipoetry for the poetic thing itself. What the medium can proffer is means to poetic ends. In this way the best current digital poetries modify our poetic inheritance and contribute to our greater appreciation of the form.

Video and Cin(E)-Poetry

The generic label "video poetry" encompasses wildly various aesthetic and technological terrain, so much so the uninitiated benefit from a map to guide their virtual travel. There are two basic manifestations of video poetry: *docu-video-poems* and *filmic poems*. The first video poems arguably can be said to be humble videotapings of poets reading their works alone against a gray backdrop or in front of a seat-shifting audience. These *docu-videos* seek nothing more than to record a poet's voice and figure as she or he intones the poem, giving literal body and voice to what readers (and bored schoolkids) had heretofore experienced only as strings of letters upon a printed page. The departure point for what has since become a fairly exotic sojourn, these videos may seem tame, if not altogether domesticated. However, this first attempt to break the page barrier, if you will, was part historical record—hence the documentary aspect—and part aesthetic experimentation that aspired to poetry's oral roots by moving off page into performative space. Poetry's performative, not merely textual, experience was foregrounded, recalling poetry's original bardic offices—the skald giving forth for royalty and the assembled tribe. These modest beginnings were in actuality rather revolutionary. They desired to use technology to make the *in situ* performative experience of the poetry reading available at anytime to anyone with access to the then-current technology's evolving cutting edge of the VCR, DVD, or Internet. Gradually, one's notion of the tribe moved from one's close geographical peers to the world at large, a global poetry clan of fellow believers.

One notable result of the docu-video-poem was its ability to scale the

fortified walls of the nation's school system. Suddenly, visionary teachers had means to engage students with living poetic art, a human and febrile performance that was literally and figuratively *moving.* This freed poetry from the textbook page and gave it body and voice. My own use of the docuvideo poem in classrooms elicited energetic student response to the musical power of language. Strangely, the most disengaged students directly *engaged* what they had regarded formerly as merely dry dead words of dry dead poets. What's more, in nearly every classroom, students remarked upon the ways hearing and seeing the poet read a poem enabled them to enter the work's textual subtleties. This reception encouraged them not only to appreciate such verbal nuance but also to aspire to the same in their own writing. Reading poetry became not the usual *Where's Waldo?* hunt for meaning but a lively response to performative art. Indeed, the most popular aspects of the two poetry Web sites I've created are their video and audio poetry selections; those pages garner nearly triple the number of visitor hits compared to the Web sites' pages offering mere textual poetry.[10]

A good example is African American poet Allison Joseph's video performance of her poem "In the Bookstore." The poem recounts the black teenage speaker's experience of being followed around a Bronx bookstore by the shop's white owner who was certain the teenager was there only to "steal her store / out from under her." Why else, the racist owner wonders, would an African American teenager come to a bookstore? Surely not, as the teenage speaker admits of herself, because she was "greedy for the life of the mind." My summation of the poem pales in comparison to Joseph's inimitable and feisty video performance, as her rendition further contextualizes the poem's print version available online.[11]

Other Web sites featuring such work have been created by Chicagoan Kurt Heintz and University of Pennsylvania professor Alan Filreis. Heintz's *Videotheque,* one element of his e-poets.network, parades a sheath of docupoems amid poets' video and audio poetry.[12] Elsewhere, Filreis has collected more than fifteen hundred audio recordings of contemporary poets reading representative poems in song-length MP3 format. His hope is to induce university students to choose iPod poems over music during their daily walks to class. Perhaps the most compelling Internet archive of audio and video poetry can be found at UbuWeb, an independent and not-for-profit resource "dedicated to all strains of the avant-garde, ethnopoetics, and outsider arts."[13] Focusing on the work of outlier artists decidedly beyond the mainstream—

"opposing" poets, if you will—UbuWeb's library of arts-related audio and video rivals or exceeds that of any other such repository, both mammoth and ambitious in its scope.

This sort of documentary-based video poetry owns artistic limitations, as Heintz and multiple others have discovered. For one thing, viewers of docupoems may tend to focus their attention more on the performers and less on the works being performed. The second broad category of video poetry, what I call "filmic poetry," responds to these constraints by presenting an amalgam of spoken or written text, imagery, and music. In a gesture not far removed from MTV's groundbreaking venture into music video, practitioners of filmic poetry blend word, image, music, sound, and performance into an expanded conception of poetic possibility. It's one thing to hear and see the *poet* speaking word and image, but it's quite another to hear and see the *poem* as word and image visually interpreted as one does in film or cinema. As Jean Cocteau believed the language of the cinema was the language of the poet, in filmic poetry the language of the poet inversely becomes the language of cinema. Advocates of the form assert that this mode does not represent the death knell of reading, as some might fret. Instead, they suggest the form constructs the architecture of a new kind of literacy that Heintz describes as "visible, audible, temporal, conscious, tactile, bonding author and reader by their gaze."[14] In short, image, sound, and music function as words in filmic poetry. Image is word. Word is image.

One of Heintz's first ventures into filmic poetry was his 1995 version of Quraysh Ali Lansana's "Passage," a print-based poem examining "the rites of passage" among generations of African American males.[15] Set in wintry Chicago, the video poem opens with a blurred shot of the poet's voicing his poem askance before the skittery camera's eye. The setting is urban nighttime, as edgy and nervous as the gyrating poet and the equally urgent camera, while the poet intones, "Sirens scream, / another nighttime episode of themes." Soundtracked by a thumping jazz bass, the poet gives forth on the urban scene while a scat-voiced singer wails a haunting vibe.

Cascading images of downtown bus stops and street corners, the video moves among the accustomed frustrations and temptations of urban life: all the "waiting" for a bus, for meaning, for directions to somewhere redemptive that seems evermore elusive, a "sad, sad repetition." Highlighting the intergenerational nature of this passage, images of 40 oz. malt liquor bottles fade in and out of school hallway scenes of young black men, waiting

their own endless wait for "change," for "tomorrow" amid "broken dreams," exams, and "manhood" checked at the door.

What's curious here is how much the poem remains only one man's art, in spite of its bevy of urban scenes and characters. Because the poet as speaker voices the poem and frequently reappears on camera in body, a black Tiresias whose blurred vision sees what others are blind to, the video valorizes the single authorial I and "eye." Despite its wide cast of jump-cut-imaged characters and its nearly frenetic scene-shifting, the video poem, in effect, offers up a singular vision of one voice and one poet. Technology has given us a body of images to flesh out the spoken voice of the unseen text, but all of them issue from a solitary authorial source. Surprisingly, one may argue this quality is less avant-garde than characteristic of the traditional academic lyric.

Other filmic expressions deviate strikingly from this one-person/one-vision approach. Many filmic poems seem not the expression of individual voice but rather a collective hallucination given digital reality. Whether in reality these pieces are collaborative, they give viewers just such an impression through their blending of forms once thought to be discrete. One way to do so is to eliminate individual human characters altogether and replace them with animated figures and digital stills. Likewise, the poet's spoken voice is swapped with nomadic text that shifts about the computer screen's material space, appearing and disappearing in random or sequential patterns. To add the sonic component lost when the poet's spoken voice is silenced, digital music frequently soundtracks the visual display.

One natural extension of filmic poetry is its inclusion in an international array of video and film festivals. No doubt the overlapping of technological and lyrical interests between poetry and film partly accounts for this, but so also does the ubiquity of the Web as distribution means for such work. Even a quick Google search turns up a plethora of video poetry international festivals, including those in San Francisco, Chicago, Buenos Aires, Vancouver, New Delhi, Barcelona, and Aix-en-Provence, France.[16]

Perhaps no one has done more to fuel the interaction of poetry and film than digital artist and filmmaker George Aguilar. In fact, Aguilar coined one of the more prevalent terms for the mode: Cin(E)-Poetry. Aguilar works in a variety of video technologies, among them digital still photography, animation, 3-D animation, and Machinimation—and each of his Cin(E)-Poems augments its visual features with a dynamic soundtrack of music and sound

effects. Aguilar, while often drawing inspiration from the natural world, say, sunrise in the Grand Canyon, or from the world of Impressionistic art, shows particular fondness for literary texts. A representative sample of sources for Aguilar's works includes an ancient Chinese story from the Spring and Autumn period of 700 B.C.E., the work of World War I poet Wilfred Owen, and even a poem by the relatively unknown contemporary Minnesota poet David Bengtson. Both by practice and by inclination, Aguilar examines the interplay of printed text and video expression.

Aguilar's "Frozen Blistered Hand," an homage to Wilfred Owen's poignant World War I verses, can be usefully described as "digital painting."[17] It incorporates digital stills, animation, and Machinimation technology with battle-zone sound effects and a lilting Brahms violin composition. Rather than reproducing in total a single Owen poem, Aguilar favors literary "sampling," excerpting lines from several Owen poems in the fashion of a contemporary DJ's penchant for stealing bass lines and guitar hooks. And Aguilar doesn't lift excerpts as intact verse units; instead, he works in fragments, shoring them against his ruins à la T. S. Eliot's methodology. In "Frozen, Blistered Hand," for instance, Aguilar creates a fresh textual experience by stealing the fifth line from Owen's "Strange Meeting" and splicing it onto line ten from the same poem. In this way, the Cin(E)-Poet serves as literary as well as visual editor, juxtapositioning and realigning original printed-page verse. Aguilar's "Frozen, Blistered Hand" opens with a digitized photo of a World War I pilot against whom Owen's words progressively appear in slow-motion reveal:

Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
By his dead smile I knew we stood in hell.

While a digitized solder plays the Brahms on violin, scenes of trench and aerial warfare animate the computer screen. Intermittently, lines from several Owen poems emerge on screen, text formatted as centerpieces of the home front's flickering wartime newsreels produced by Pathe-Gazette. The effect is to deliver to the reader poetic lines in the historically accurate cinematic manner that home-front citizens received news of the war. Later, as an animated aerial dogfight plays out, one plane spirals down, smoking its death spin to the ground it meets with a flash and bang. To close his Cin(E)-Poem, Aguilar adds a further element of intertextuality by inserting seven

well-known lines from William Butler Yeats's "The Second Coming" splayed in ghostly white letters against a solemn black screen, beginning with "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" and closing with "Surely the Second Coming is at hand." All the while the Brahms plays achingly, both counterpoint to and confirmation of the black silence that swallows the poem.

One other Aguilar composition warrants attention as much for its author as for its execution. Aguilar took retired high school English instructor David Bengtson's page-based poem "Blackbirds" and gave it digitized audio and visual life. Bengtson is hardly the kind of chap one would even loosely associate with Cin(E)-Poetry endeavors. He hails not from either fashionable coast or from an urban center offering the poet an eclectic soup pot of avant-garde artists from which to ladle his aesthetic broth. No, Bengtson's roots finger down into the loamy soil of Long Prairie, Minnesota, where he seems a video-making isolato among wheat and sunflowers and the long horizon of the nation's Northern plains. Even more notably, Bengtson came to video poetry equally from an esoteric longing for writerly expression and from his devotion to teaching high school creative writing workshops. A fellow used to open spaces and limitless horizons of north central Minnesota, Bengtson chafed at the confined space and literal materiality of the printed page. In the realm of image as word and word as image, Bengtson found a hospitable form as borderless and fenceless as the land he moved across. Notably, Bengtson became among the first American high school instructors to design and teach a video poetry course in which students combined the writing of poetry with the creation of video poems. For his students, an Apple computer's iMovie program became both means and lens through which to reenvision what for them had been a purely print-based form.

Aguilar gives us Bengtson's "Blackbirds" via the poet's on-screen emergent text, animation, and Aguilar's digital (colorized) stills photographed in Long Prairie.[18] The Cin(E)-Poem initiates with an image of a prairie church, its bell clanging funereally against an explosively orange sky, a symbol of the shades of violence about to ensue. Aguilar affords the poem a kind of pre-text pretext before it appears, one that establishes the tone and sets up a soon-to-be-realized parallel between these birds and their human counterparts, by opening the Cin(E)-Poem with these lines: "At this final service / all heads are bowed. / The relatives have gathered." Then a flurry of farm images appears, upon which the poem's beginning lines waver and disappear:

The other day a farmer told me,
'They'll wipe out a whole field
if you let them.'

The "whole field" referred to is one of ripe sunflowers, bent-necked with the weight of their full heads of seeds, and "they" references a flock of keening blackbirds descending like bombers from a sky so bright it looks aflame. When the birds land, they alight with vengeance upon the tipped neck of each plant, one to one, coupled in their hunger and their providence, each bird pecking away the sunflower's open face. When three gunshots ring out, off go the screeching birds, leaving the field to the poet who walks its rows, touching "the fine / white hair that grows on each neck." Then the poem quick-cuts back to the church scene, where the pre-text lines reappear, this time cueing viewers to the scene. These relatives who haven't "spoken for years" have gathered to fight over the dead kin's possessions, especially a large "brooch." When blackbird keening gives way to the rush of human voices arguing unintelligibly, readers note the parallel established between two kinds of ravenous creatures indicted here. Slowly, the brooch's twin digitized human faces disassemble and reemerge into paired sunflower faces, as both human and plant suffer the common fate of being picked over by the greedy. Its digital space fading to black and its credits shimmering on screen, the Cin(E)-Poem's symbolic tolling rings disturbingly true.

Lest you think Aguilar and Bengtson's collaboration appears provincial in its homely setting and stark digital imagery, let me adduce proof to the contrary. Aguilar and Bengtson entered the Cin(E)-Poetry version of "Blackbirds" in the 2004 Berkeley Film and Video Festival; there, the poem garnered Grand Prize Winner honors in the Experimental category. Evidence thus suggests that festival judges, denizens of West Coast chic and its technological cutting edge, were captivated by a Midwesterner's vision given poetic digital expression. Score one for Long Prairie.

New Media Poetry

Among the first literary scholars to suggest ways the "electronic word" was changing our conception of literature and the literary, Richard Lanham noted in 1989 the computer's knack for breaking down barriers between creator and critic. The computer itself, in fact, came to constitute for Lanham

"the ultimate postmodern work of art."[19] As a result, he championed the enlarging of literary studies to encompass other art forms. Much new media poetry extends from this understanding that the computer simultaneously dismantles the old order while also bridging the gap to an entirely new conception of what constitutes the literary. Both means to create art and art object itself, the computer insists that new media poetry readers engage the materiality of the poem in ways that printed-text readers have come to ignore or simply to take for granted. Centuries of reading practice literally hardwired into the human brain have accustomed us to accept the poem's presentation on the printed page as a given, a mode unalterable and trustworthily forthright. Encountering a printed page, few pause to consider the visual coding inherent in the poem's appearance on the page. As Jerome McCann argues in his cogent *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web,* print texts employ—in their use of italics, indentation, line breaks, and the like—a manner of formatting mark-up language not far removed from that of the digital text's background code.[20] Still, most readers, lulled into readerly somnambulism by longstanding print conventions, fail to think of printed-page text as a highly coded field, an arena bringing together vortices of writerly and readerly choices at play.

Precisely this assumption underlies the making and reception of new media poetry, a realm where poet, poem, and reader interact within a digital locale rather than upon the flat plane of a printed page. The result, Talan Memmott proposes, is that the new media poet is "not writing on a surface but writing in a space."[21] The technological nature of that space opens up avenues of convergence among the word and multiple art forms, including music, film, sound, and still image. If any notion can be submitted as foundational among the great variety of new media poetry expressions, it is the belief in merging art forms whose functions and capabilities overlap. New media poems work best—or perhaps *only*—if the reader comes to envision word and image not only as complementary but also as interchangeable. Network artist Adrian Miles suggests the primacy of this view in his own work, which he claims has been "primarily about getting rid of this distinction between words and pictures. For me, writing hypertextually is always a postcinematic writing. . . . While pictures work differently than words, their networks . . . or the differences in their networks are erased."[22] All new media poetry aspires to envision word, sound, and image as unified not discrete entities. Support for this claim can be found in multimedia texts archived at

what is arguably the finest repository of e-poetry: the University of Buffalo's Electronic Poetry Center Web site, founded by new media poet and critic Loss Pequeno Glazier.[23] This site gathers a wide array of digital poems, including work by notable e-poets such as Jim Andrews, John Cayley, and Brian Kim Stefans.[24]

One expression of new media poetry can be positioned as an extension of experimental print literature of earlier periods, experiments that met their limits upon the circumscribed boundaries of the page. In *Digital Poetics,* Glazier traces e-poetry's lineage in print-based poetries, including Modernist innovations with the polyvocal "I" and multiple referentiality, Charles Olson's Projectivist theory of the page as an energy field for splayed textual expression, various "mimeo" poetry practitioners, and Concrete poets' insistence on the interplay of the visual and the verbal.[25] With the arrival of digital technology, the playing field, however, was allowed to migrate off the page into electronic space. What, for example, the Concrete poet could do only in fixed form of shaped language on the stable printed page, the e-poet can now do in nomadic, changeable text migrating in and out of the digital space.

In significant ways some e-poems show their heritage in the printed page by their adherence to textual fixity. That is, although the e-poem's text may skitter wildly about the page, appearing and disappearing with seeming randomness, this textual performance is fixed by the poet and programmer. What appears in one reading/viewing will appear in similar fashion in subsequent readings. Peter Howard's "Xylo" offers an instructive example.[26] The poem opens with flashing red words scrolling frenetically upon a white screen. All the while techno music soundtracks the movement of what appears to be a rifle sight—a circle intersected at its quadrants by short, straight lines—as it flits about the screen. Additionally, several eruptive sights spew words upon the screen, changing colors and fonts and moving with nervous alacrity. The reader's eye is faced with an increment of choices. Should one follow the crosshairs, the tiny red words, or the large, more colorful text that animates the page then vanishes with frustrating speediness? That bevy of choices, mostly absent from a printed-page text, offers much of the poem's allure. Readers confront the sense they will never be able to catch up with the text's Heraclitean flux, an image no doubt meant to evoke the bewitchingly episodic flow of human existence. Gradually the red words begin to assemble lineated text in various spots around the screen, and the

reader is comforted at last to make out something vaguely reminiscent of the printed poem and its means of dispensing language as meaning:

It was so still
all you could hear was birdsong

Over time, the flitting verbiage gains a certain tonal consistency identifiable in word strings such as "seduction," "Venus," "Cupid," "covet," and readers imagine romantic interplay between a couple immersed in a natural setting. When the following lines coagulate, readers assume they have entered a conventional love poem presented through unconventional means:

I reached for your hand
you gave it
a comfort
in somewhere suddenly cold

When subsequent bracketed text urges readers to "close up" on a "piton" pulling loose, a rope drawn tight, granite giving way, readers suddenly see the rock-climbing metaphor as emblematic of the fragility of human relationships, as one lover dissolves into another and each partner has "no memory of being attached."

What's curious, and wonderful, about the poem is how its text—despite its nomadic movements and evaporations—retains an aura of fixedness. Its Flash media design allows for the poet's fixed text to play only as the poet programmed it to appear. In this way its text is thus as controlled and controlling as the typical page-oriented poem. The text does not alter its performance from one viewing to the next, and its readers do not participate in its making by altering its performance or contributing lines of their own. Readers, by their initializing act of clicking "Play," consume the poem as they would ingest a meal made wholly by another. Although readers engage the poem's text in fresh digital ways, one might also argue that fixing the text and closing it to readerly changes replicate similar manners of a printed-page poem. What at first may seem strikingly radical is shown, upon closer examination, to owe much to an earlier poetic mode whose aesthetic the poem imaginatively expands via digital means.

Other forms of new media poetry are founded not on the concept of

textual stability but instead on counternotions of textual instability. These e-poems valorize textual variability and its resultant offering of surprise, employing the computer's technological possibilities to produce this effect. One such text is Glazier's "White-Faced Bromelaids on 20 Hectares," which utilizes Java Script to alter its welter of Latin American images and Spanish/English text. Mixed by a computer algorithm, fresh textual phrasings are generated every ten seconds, so line variants blend with the original text of this eight-poem sequence. Glazier offers the first-time reader a set of "reading notes" as guideline for engaging the text of his eight-, nine-, and ten-line poems: "Allow this page to cycle for a while, so you can take in some of the images and variant titles. When you are ready, press begin. Once there, read each page slowly, watching as each line periodically reconstitutes itself regenerating randomly selected lines with that line's variant. Eight-line poems have 256 possible variations; nine-line poems have 512 possible versions."[27] Thus, the poet's original text is made malleable, restless, and evolving—suggesting a fundamental distrust in fixedness of any text or idea. Many freshly mixed phrasings prove to be inventive, striking, even humorous. Others strike one as Frankensteinian restitchings merely digitally cobbled together. The poem therefore results from the collaborative effort of poet and computer program, for the poet makes an original text that the algorithm continually remakes. In this way the poem's invisible coding is made visible to the reader as an imaginative wellspring of generative possibility. In effect, this coded algorithm becomes the poem's inventive Dr. Frankenstein, randomly unfixing the body of formerly fixed text.

This regenerating process problematizes the reading process, making it nearly impossible for a reader to "read each page slowly" with the triggered alteration approaching untiringly every ten seconds. Patient readers are rewarded with surprising juxtapositions carrying considerable suggestive import. The lush Latin American scenes (of Costa Rica?) mesh nicely with the blended English and Spanish text, which not so subtly hints at a necessary reappraisal of "colonial" attitudes and politics. In the first of eight poems, readers encounter both real and imagined visions of a "white housed land," juxtaposing the presidential White House of Washington, DC, with more humble dwellings native to Latin America. The smashing together of native scenes and lifestyles with the "Big Mac" culture of North America slowly creates, disassembles, and reassembles a raft of meanings. Many of these are electric with political/cultural charge inherent in phrases such

as "reading the Pre-Socratics in Havana" or becoming a "social flycatcher." Glazier's poem recalls for me the cut-up poem experimentation of Dadaist poets who were fond of disassembling text—literally cutting up the paged text—and then randomly regenerating fresh text by pulling the new poem's verbal parts one by one from a bag or hat. In a metaphor both telling and on target, e-poet Jim Andrews labels his own versions of this form "Stir Frys," citing as well the adventurous prose writer William S. Burroughs's and the artist Dali's earlier fondness for similar cut-up remixings.[28]

Another type of e-poem operates as a site for participants' interactivity with a changeable text. A good example is Andrews's *Arteroids 2.5,* which combines text and readerly play. Here, the author's own brief texts and textual excerpts from other sources, say, Charles Olson's esteemed essay on poetic method and form, "Projective Verse," are subject to the reader's ability to click and move that text by moving the computer mouse.[29] As its name implies, the poem knocks off the popular video game Asteroids; however, in this version, the player flies around deep space in a spaceship chosen from a storehouse arsenal of poetic and critical terminology. If the player's ship is struck by one of the cascading words or phrases, it blows up to become a "circular letteristic spray of letters." If the player successfully shoots the fragmented text, that text will "vaporize into ideas." Andrews describes the process this way: "When you 'win' or 'lose' at *Arteroids,* a short text is displayed. There are about 500 such texts in *Arteroids.* Some of those texts are quotations; most are my own work. And there are blue and green texts that appear in *Arteroids.* Most of these are mine, but there are also texts by Christina McPhee and Helen Thorington that are selectable in Word for Weirdos in 'play mode' of *Arteroids.*"[30] Andrews has found innovative digital means to conjoin the act of thinking about and making poetry with the essential act of play, and thus the player interacts with text- and image-making in a kind of art-game.

Part of the allure here surely is the notion of e-poetry as mode of literary liberation, occasioned by hypertext's interactive properties. Still, that interaction operates—as does Glazier's poem discussed earlier—within explicit boundaries of text, image, and motion—not within an infinitely various world of possibility. The reader's limits of poetic variation are established within boundaries demarcated by the poet's original text. The user cannot truly be considered to be boundlessly free. Lynn Wells wisely notes that such a user interacts "with a previously established set of parameters" that limits

the user's supposed "autonomy."[31] Both the world the user moves through and his agent of engagement with it have been created (and thus fenced in) by the poem-game's poet/programmer.

Some e-poems stretch the idea of alterable text and collaborative creation even further from the normative conventions of traditional page-oriented verse. In response, some contemporary poetry readers may well dispute whether the thing created is a poem at all. The piece may be playful and even defensibly artful, but is it a poem? Consider the matter of Seb Chevrel and Gabe Kean's "You and We," a piece originally appearing in the Web journal *Born Magazine* and one that its creators call "a collective experiment." Interacting with the piece, visitors participate by uploading texts and images that then become part of the poem's mixed-media presentation.[32] Since the sequences appear in an algorithmic order, the work continually evolves in terms of arrangement and content. A driving techno beat, the favored soundtrack genre of many new media poems, spills over the feverishly changing text and image samplings, resulting in weird, humorous, and occasionally meaningful on-screen juxtapositions of text and image. Fairly innocuous text such as "Jeff Steiner I remember you," for instance, blends with a photo of three young men standing arm-in-arm to create a quaint sort of family-photo-album effect. Then, in the next instant this formerly bland text is charged with emotive meaning when "Jeff Steiner I remember you" is superimposed over the face of a dead man laid out horizontally across the screen. Here, chance content and algorithmic design combine to make a stunningly evocative event. Still, among lines that readers rightly would consider passable attempts at hip poetic, say, "I'm growing flowers in my head," the reader is bathed with mere text-message content of this sort, "Hi T.M." This flat intrusion likely annoys most readers whose initials aren't T.M. Regardless, there seems no shortage of readers tempted to join the piece's collective artistic endeavors. On the December 2008 date of my viewing, the poem boasted 9,996 "txts" and 4,428 "imgs," a slew of them uploaded from users' own troves of word and image.

The site cautions participants to be "patient" after uploading their contributions to the collective experiment. One can easily imagine visitors enduring the site's flood of image, text, and techno music (which thankfully can be silenced with a click) only long enough to see their own text and images displayed. "Hey, Kirsten, I just saw your note," we imagine T.M. exclaiming from the other room, as he clicks off the screen and departs the

site. Who lingers for a sufficiently prolonged period for the work's flood of image and language to suffuse the reader with any sense of wholeness? Or is that just the point? The work's poet/programmer has assumed the role of facilitator whose invention enables others to engage in a creative act. In this way the work's creative performance is founded largely in the collectivity of visitors' (momentary) participatory acts. One might rightly deem its participants to be the work's authors, thus decentering the "poets" as creative agents and equally foregrounding the question of what actually is authored in the process.

The question of authorship is further complicated by recent developments in what has come to be known as Flarf poetry, a loose "movement" of poets favoring the collage mode of composition. Where the issue of authorship gets knotty is in the source of the very text collaged into a poem: much of Flarf poetry originates outside of the author, culled from writing available through a variety of Internet venues such as blogs and chat rooms as well as through Google searches. In short, much of Flarf writing is made of others' writing. What's more, the raw material favored for sampling in Flarf poems may resemble in form and content the basest of Internet drivel. That content habitually exudes sentimentality, spews offensive social or sexual commentary, and bandies about its ranting as if in mortal combat with traditional, sedate, moralistic verse. The results frequently can be seen as hilarious ripostes to the notion of staid verse itself.

The form got its start, Flarf legend has it, when Gary Sullivan resolved to expose the International Library of Poetry (ILP) as a publisher more intent on making money than on printing quality verse. Indeed, many accuse the ILP of preying upon unschooled poets by accepting almost anything sent its way and then charging these overjoyed poets outlandish fees to publish their works in anthologized format. The International Library of Poetry may be fairly regarded as a vanity press for unwitting poets who do not realize they are paying to play. To unmask the fraud, Sullivan submitted a purposefully dreadful poem for consideration by the ILP. In short order Sullivan's truly awful collage poem was accepted for publication. Thus, the theory and practice of Flarf were born with Sullivan's poem "mm-hmm," which opens with these (pun intended) crappy lines: "Yeah, mm-hmm, it's true / big birds make /big doo!" Over the form's brief five-year history, Flarf has expanded its crosshairs to target mainstream poetic art and to call into question the very concept of good taste. In this way Flarf resembles the early twentieth-

century Dadaist rebellion born in response to the horrors of World War I. Dadaist poets often (literally) cut-up text in order to reassemble and remake it, thereby accentuating the absurd in an age when all social order appeared bankrupt. Employing fresh technology, Flarf poets have tweaked this method of creation via disassembly. Flarf practitioners selectively sample spoonfuls of others' texts to fill their own poems' plates, satisfying their hunger for language and expression by feeding at the Internet's unlimited-trip verbal smorgasbord. Doing so, Flarf employs the digital innovations of its moment to needle the era's prevailing aesthetics.

That the movement attracted the attention of the dominant mode's most revered venue—Chicago's *Poetry* magazine—both validates its insurgency and arguably signals its death throes. Flarf would do well to consider the implications surrounding the appropriation of its rebellion by poetry's mainstream forces. How anti-aesthetic can one be when one has been published by the very institution one seeks to dethrone? The July/August 2009 issue of *Poetry* devotes lavish attention to sampling the work of Flarf poets and Conceptual poets (the latter a loosely corollary movement). Among Flarf poets included are K. Silem Mohammed, Mel Nichols, Drew Gardner, and Sullivan himself, whose work is featured in cartoon format. There, using others' words as a substitution for one's own, as both personal and poetic strategy, is championed by Mohammed's "Poems about Trees": "when I get nervous I get hyper and bump into people / I read to them what MapQuest gave me." And Mel Nichols's "I Google Myself" does double-duty Flarf by referring directly to Google as means of writing and of self-definition. By hip allusion to The Divinyls's song "I Touch Myself," the poem gains an even more sexy intertextuality, a self-referencing that is both cultural and personal: "When I think of you / I Google myself." As these poems build a tentative notion of what Flarf poetry may be, they simultaneously dismantle that view. Flarf poems revel in the instability and variability of context, purpose, and meaning that underlie the form.

As introduction to the *Poetry* feature, Kenneth Goldsmith, a Conceptual poet who practices a brand of "found" poetics, offers his take on what it means to be a poet in the Internet age. Goldsmith gives context to Flarf (and to some extent Conceptual) poets' propensity to nibble from others' works as opposed to wholly serving up their own: "Identity, for one, is up for grabs. Why use your own words when you can express yourself just as well by using someone else's? And if your identity is not your own, then sincerity must be

tossed out as well. . . . Disposability, fluidity, and recycling: there's a sense that these words aren't meant for forever. Today they're glued to a page but tomorrow they could re-emerge as a Facebook meme. Fusing the avant-garde impulses of the last century with the technologies of the present, these strategies propose an expanded field for twenty-first-century poetry."[33] In this way, the means and definition of poetry—as well as human identify itself—come to be altered by technological creep. Here technology offers Flarf both the method and the content to express evolving poetic practice.

Replay and Revision: Summation and Prognostication

This discussion commenced with a set of sliding-scale measures that illustrates e-poetry's oppositional relationship to "academic" poetic practice. Those metrics have been useful in detailing digital poetry's departure from standard poetic manners that invest largely in the voiced language of a recognizable "I," single authorship, the fixed text closed to collaborative participation, and loyalty to the printed page. But scrutiny has also shown unexpected ways some electronic poetries share qualities with print-based forms against which they supposedly rebel, say, for example, some filmic poetry's reliance on the author-centered lyric "I." To varying degrees of choice and execution, the digital examples examined earlier demonstrate the working principles of a counteraesthetic fairly summarized here:

- Polyvocal expression
- Collaborative authorship
- Nomadic and changeable texts
- Participatory user input
- Preference for the computer screen as performative site

By means of this ostensibly antipoetic poetic stance, e-poetry hopes to establish its own legitimacy, partly by extending forms of experimental printed-page verse and partly by repudiating conventional verse's dearest assumptions. As the Russian critic Juri Lotman notes, all artistic rebellions root themselves in negating the prior mode's accepted qualities by use of what he calls "minus-devices," acts of consistent, conscious rejection of previous artistic principles.[34] However, by defining themselves in negation to the conventional mode, all such rebellions inextricably tie themselves to the

manners they refuse. Without its necessary other, the countermovement's heretical rebelliousness drifts unmoored amid a sea of possibilities. Floating too far from charted land, the revolution risks losing track of where it was headed in the first place. Worse yet, if the mutinous work sails radically too far from the aesthetic regime it has tossed overboard, readers may lose this useful context and fail to see the piece as literature at all.

One wonders if that fate may befall some works included in the "Electronic Literature Collection" compiled by the Electronic Literature Organization to archive and present digital works.[35] Katherine Hayles accurately describes most of these pieces as exhibiting "important visual components" and "sonic effects" blended with language. Open-minded readers will regard much of this work, experimental though it may be, as unequivocally *literary* if not as purely *literature.* What's at issue here is the roughly one third of these works that present "no recognizable words."[36] How will current and future readers welcome those pieces as literature when they lack the fundamental literary ingredient of language? As one has come to expect, Perloff puts a fine point to it: "However we choose to define it, poetry is the *language art;* it is, by all accounts, language that is somehow extraordinary, that can be processed only upon rereading." The new digital techniques enabling language to move around a computer screen and to disappear in a programmable Flash, Perloff argues, "become merely tedious unless the poetry in question is, in Ezra Pound's words, 'charged with meaning.'"[37]

Many of us know the aching disappointment that issues from perusing the lyrics of a favorite song we have giddily hummed and jammed and danced to. How often we find that those words lack the voltage with which they bristle when accompanied by horn and flute, violin and timpani, guitar and drums. Listening to music, as well as making it, is thus a holistic experience in which constituent parts dazzle decidedly less than the work's unified whole. The same can be argued for reading—and for making—poems. Reading and commenting on e-poetry thus necessarily demands attention to the whole as much as to its parts. A *play*list of the best electronic poems, whether video or new media in form, amply rewards this type of global aesthetic consideration.

Reflecting on digital poetry also obligates the critic to become conversant with the ways these works are created via word, image, and code. Memmott calls this newfangled critic of the newfangled poetry the "poetician," commentator intent upon discovering the ways language and technology come

to "play" together—his word choice echoing our initial talk of play as essential to e-poetry.[38] If considerable numbers of fresh readers are ever to engage new media poetry in worthwhile ways, the gulf between digital literary works and print-oriented responses to those works must be bridged by knowing commentators from both realms. In that regard, one hopes this essay is but the vanguard of other print-based poets' ruminations on digital verse.

It may be that new media works exist in a realm for which we currently have no sufficiently reliable taxonomy, a kind of art that may be regarded as possessing *poetic* qualities but that may not be definitively classified as *poetry.* Engaging that realm's possibilities and limitations may enable poets the luxurious necessity of unceasing growth, an evolutionary aesthetic bearing the art form into its future. To occasion such advance—which ought to be the fervent goal of poets of all aesthetic stripes—each side of the digital divide must both speak to and learn from the other. While the two sides may not now, nor perhaps ever, stand together upon those "new shores" Glazier believes e-poetry sails from and toward, poetry has begun a digital voyage from which there is little chance of turning back.

CHAPTER 8

These Drafts and Castoffs

Mapping Literary Manuscripts

Outside Madrid's Reine Sophia Museum, night's pregnant belly spilling over the city's belted horizon, I too was heavy with arrival. Picasso's *Guernica* had delivered me from paella and red wine. Spanish teenagers cascading off a bus soon engulfed me. In unison they lifted the black hoods of their Oakland Raiders hoodies, a cross-cultural sign of street cred and disaffection. I rolled up my collar. Inside Reine Sophia's blend of contemporary glass and the old stone of Madrid's first hospital, all the birth- and death-beds had given way to the province of modern art. "Second floor, room 6," I mumbled, locating Picasso's great work in space if not time. Then, sudden compadres, we stood before the painting, iron filings drawn by its shadowy magnet. Arm by lifted arm, the boys dropped their hoods, leaves unleafing from the windswept branch, their hair black as tree trunk, mine as gray as week-old snow. Ruffled quiet of shuffled feet. A sigh. The lights' theatrical hum. In the presence of art, only the painting spoke.

Twenty minutes, an hour, who knows? By chance I wandered through a doorway into an adjacent room. There, behind glass, lay Picasso's rough penciled studies for *Guernica.* Smallish against the painting's eventual sprawl, the sequential studies held hands—their line a bloodline. Sketchbook size, his pencil's graphite gray against gray paper, they seemed at first glance so unimpressive I wondered who thought to save these, mere drafts and cast-offs. The first was hardly more than squiggled shapes, something tornadic rising up from chaos left center. In the next that tornado became a raised fist, gesture of defiance to Franco's fascism. Later, came Spain's national symbol, a great bull looking first in my eyes and then away. Gradually, village build-

ings half in rubble, a roof akilter and giving way. Now here, where the fist once fisted, one wide-eyed horse swallowed a dropped bomb, its rider dead upon the ground. Then the fist was gone, and the dove of peace, wings flown from right to left center, now hovered nearly painted over amid the drear. Finally, the Basque mother cradling a dead child, akimbo and limp in her frail arms. Innocents, welcome to twentieth-century warfare, whose victims were as likely civilians as soldiers.

The painting astonished me even more once I witnessed the process and dross of its making. Where Picasso had traveled, how he wandered, got lost, and eventually turned up at *Guernica* now loomed as beautiful as the ultimate emergence of his painting.

It's said great artists transport the viewer, reader, and listener. Picasso had sent me reeling, vertiginous and ecstatic. Standing among his painting's studies, I sensed kinship of process and product. I remembered as a graduate student thumbing James Wright's *Amenities of Stone,* the suppressed 1961 poetry manuscript Wright withdrew from publication. There, in Wright's draft revisions, elisions, and diaristic commentary, I had first caught sight of the personal, cultural, and aesthetic vortex of artistic creation. There, Wright had dismissed the manuscript's aesthetic schizophrenia, its mixing of "old" and "new" poetic modes. With Wright's failed book in hand, clutching a dead man's work, I had wondered then who thought to save these drafts and castoffs.

Art lovers are hedonists of the first order, beautifully selfish with their eyes and ears. In a world where varieties of ugliness circle like vultures hungry for one's attention, who is to be blamed for taking beauty as its own reward? Many who appreciate art's capability for aesthetic transport naturally care less about the journey than its destination. For the nonspecialist—which is to say for most of America—that the poem, song, or painting conveys beauty is sufficient unto itself. In short, it's not process but result that captures one's attention. Surely this is true for one's own route to pleasure—how one got there looms less critical than the matter of one's having arrived in the first place.

It's a shame if this lack of curiosity suffices also for one's attitude to the artist's journey, the thorny creative path an artist seldom trollops happily from A to Z. Both Wright's manuscripts and Picasso's studies map the topog-

raphy of imagination. They plot a terrain where one powerful tectonic force slams against another, shaping the artistic landscape in volatile and unpredictable ways. They reveal artists tugged this way by human emotion, hauled that way by artistic invention, discovery, and surprise. A penciled GPS of the artists' turns, backups, and swerves, their manuscripts and studies compose an ex post facto map for a trip that cannot be repeated. Through their chronicling of both artists' journeys, these studies and drafts transported me to understanding unattainable without them.

Rather than diminishing the artist's achievement, the act of pondering the artist's fumble in the dark screwups, silly missteps, and blockheaded wrong turns actually accentuates our appreciation of the creative process. This notion ought not to be inhospitable for a culture such as ours, one enamored with beauty wrought from lumpy clay. Evidence the current spate of televised home makeovers and plastic-surgery before and afters. Why not a much-watched *Swan* for poems and paintings?

For poets the matter is especially keen. Their brave sallies and tail-between-the-legs retreats follow them in a wagon train of musty cardboard boxes. This paper trail means their desert wanderings and failed ascents record a history of not-quite-rightness with a perpetuity unavailable in many art forms. (The painter, for instance, simply paints over her misshapen forms or gauche colors.) For the past three centuries poets have both generated and maintained a vast quantity of paper drafts, a hulking body of work that floats unseen beneath the publishable tip of the iceberg. What's more, recent poets have enjoyed a veritable panoply of means to create these hard and digital drafts. And libraries have taken notice, securing huge caches of poets' manuscripts in burgeoning special collections.[1] Given this welter of paper and computer drafts, one would do well to contemplate the contemporary phenomenon of poetry manuscripts, especially what those worksheets may reveal *of* writers and thus what they may in turn reveal *to* scholars. To do so, let's examine several representative James Wright worksheets for what they disclose of the poem's and the poet's journeys into being.

Amid the Collected Cardboard Boxes

There's ore in poets' collected cardboard boxes, gold as weighty as the duct-taped, seam-split boxes themselves. Manuscripts interest us for several reasons. First, they reveal poets' creative topography, the terrain of their aes-

thetic struggles and the paths they take along the way to making a poem, a book, an oeuvre. Manuscripts also display the collision between poets' individual aesthetics and the era's literary history, that is, the interplay of personal vision and larger communal pressures. They unmask poets' literary influences in the process—in effect, letting readers in on which writers living or dead had (or have) the poet's ear. In addition, manuscripts show writers messily and vulnerably at work behind closed doors, providing a portal to the plagues of uncertainty and audacity that beset them.

Of the many insights provided by manuscript materials, the most compelling is the view proffered of poets' (re)defining their art. Drafts of familiar works exhibit the poets' tinkering well-loved, familiar poems into being in ways readers never imagined. And they may also open up new work unseen by readers' eyes, offering readers a breathtakingly fresh horizon tinged with the palette of the voyeur's rainbow. These materials come in the form of "fair" copies unsullied by the writer's revisions and "foul" copies bearing the poet's cross-outs, arrows, and occasional editorial remarks. These drafts may well constitute a previously unknown map of what a writer was up to, why, and how—something especially true of James Wright's manuscripts.

In the months following the 1959 publication of *Saint Judas,* Wright should have been waltzing on literary air. His first book *The Green Wall* (1957), had been awarded the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poets Award by the venerable W. H. Auden, and his second had garnered critical praise. In a relatively short period, his poems had appeared in many of the nation's best literary magazines, he had secured a teaching position at a major university, and he was being hailed as the American Keats for his line's deft musical touch. What young poet might find fault with this? Wright surely did, as his manuscripts and worksheets make abundantly obvious. They bare a poet in the throes of remaking himself.

Audacity of Artistic Redefinition

Wright's manuscripts and worksheets show he had begun to tire of the odd sort of ventriloquist act he had been performing, speaking his poems in the blended voices of Donne, Frost, E. A. Robinson, and other poet forebears. He had begun to doubt the rigid exigencies of the rational mind and prescribed form, suddenly imprisoned within the very classical modes whose castle he had labored mightily to build and to inhabit. The undergraduate years

studying Latin at Kenyon College had not washed the coal dust off the working-class kid from Martins Ferry, and the Ph.D. had not thoroughly cleansed the cracked diction of his "Ohioan"—a voice his poems to this point had admitted only in brief syntactic flashes. What's more, Wright's reading of foreign poets such as Georg Trakl, Lorca, Neruda, Vallejo, and others introduced poetry that privileged intuition over reason and that refused human separation from natural forces. To top it off, Wright had fallen blindsided victim to the "anthology wars" pitting traditional against more experimental aesthetics. For instance, poet James Dickey, reviewing the fairly conservative anthology *New Poets of England and America* (1957), had relegated Wright to dubious membership in the poetic "School of Charm." Not to be outdone, Richard Foster had needled Wright for his anthologized poems' "pompous and heavy poetic mannerisms."[2]

Wright saw himself trapped between two equally unappealing poles—the wild chanting of the Beat poets and the polite versifying of the academics. He wished fervently to avoid association with either group, as this unpublished ditty makes toothily clear: "The beat and slick / Are boring, yapping fleas. / They make me sick."[3] Stung emotionally and beset with artistic doubt, Wright decided to risk it all. Instead of resting on his proverbial laurels, Wright reexamined the modes and values that had brought him recognition. In short, he resolved to seek a redefinition of the poetic self. That redefinition required the poet to interrogate his dearest assumptions about what a poem is and might be and, even more fundamentally, to interrogate also his notion of what a poet is and might become.

Between 1959 and the 1963 publication of his groundbreaking *The Branch Will Not Break,* Wright tinkered with not only *Amenities of Stone* but also five other potential manuscripts. All in all, Wright auditioned 113 different poems for a role in his next collection, slowly rewriting, reimagining, or simply rejecting those that did not suit his emerging aesthetic. At one point Wright appears to have thought his remaking of poet and poem was complete, submitting *Amenities* as a March 5, 1961, manuscript of 67 poems to Wesleyan University Press for publication and release in January 1962. But the black dog of aesthetic doubt would not release its grip on Wright's leg. He alerted Donald Hall, his Wesleyan editor, and withdrew the book from publication.

Wright's arrangement of *Amenities'* poems demonstrates awareness of his own—and the era's—evolving aesthetics. Letting loose a roundhouse punch and ducking his head at the same time, Wright thought to quote Whitman

on the book's August 10, 1961, frontispiece: "I note Whitman on the defense of the past: 'If he does not provide new forms, he is not what is wanted.'" Wright hoped to fashion his new manuscript truly *new.* Still, as we shall see, that pledge proved hard to follow for numerous reasons. Of the book's three sections, the first is titled "Academic Poems." Not surprisingly, given its self-conscious title, this section contains fourteen rhymed and metrically regular poems (including two sonnets). As its name implies, "Explorations" gathers forty-eight poems exhibiting a fresh mode open to flat diction, Deep Image invention, and immersion in the natural. Of these forty-eight poems, twenty later appeared in *Branch.* The poems of the third section, "Fictitious Voices," are just that—voices Wright was trying on for size—and none survives within his subsequent book's pages.

Wright envisioned an even more overt means of bidding his solemn goodbye to academic verse. On the flyleaf of *Amenities,* the book's flagpole, if you will, Wright was to print the poem "His Farewell to Old Poetry," just in case the dense reader missed Wright's flying different colors. On a 1961 draft of the poem, Wright, intoxicated with his radical conversion, even contemplated printing the poem "in *prose.*" Elegiac, the poem begins by invoking the memory of Philip Timberlake, Wright's former teacher at Kenyon, who first taught him "the Muse survived in trees," an oddly sylvan notion of classical literary tradition. It's the poem's second section, however, that lays down the score, invoking for the initial time the recurrent image of Wright's muse "Jenny":

> *Jenny, Sir Walter Ralegh and John Donne*
> *Brood in the trees, but they say nothing now.*
> *They sang delicate melodies to your voice*
> *When I was young, but now I grant them rest.*
> . . . . . .
> *I lose*
> *All the old echoes. . . .*[4]

Wright had apprenticed to the poets of English, classicist tradition, a mode that had brought him quick renown. However, for the newly evolving Wright of 1961, those poets and that tradition "say nothing now." In the poem's third section, one can detect vitriol in Wright's declaration of independence and identify, too, a sadness bending on gloom:

Now my amenities of stone are done,
God damn me if I care whether or not
Anyone hears my voice, you will not.
We came so early, we thought to stay so long.
But it is already midnight, and we are gone.
I know your face the lovelist face I know.
Now I know nothing, and I die alone.

As this material makes apparent, Wright's redefinition of the poetic self was not to be easily occasioned. It demanded artistic and intellectual courage surely, but it also called for a full measure of emotional strength. Claiming to be done with the "old poetry" is one thing, but actually killing off the old and identifying exactly what's "new" is something altogether different.

Throughout his career Wright enjoyed tweaking the upturned noses of the competing cliques seeking to delimit the aesthetic boundaries of his poems. In fact, until his early death at age fifty-two, Wright continued to compose poems in both free and fixed forms. For Wright, the solution to his artistic troubles (and potentialities) went beyond simply rejecting rhyme and determinate meter. In what turned out to be his posthumous collection, *This Journey,* Wright had plotted one last shot at these factions, giving them a dying man's punch in their collective guts. If carefully scanned, "May Morning," one ostensible prose poem printed there, turns out instead to be a Petrarchan sonnet with a decidedly tight rhyme scheme. How Wright must have savored the chance to illustrate that good writing transcends arguments about mere form, frustrating at once the noisy proponents of both polar modes.[5]

But back in 1962 Wright was still trying to recognize the face of what to him was the new poetry. It seemed Protean, an aesthetic shape-changer. On a May 21 draft of "Holding a Pearl in My Hands, April 1962," Wright noted how the poem "hidden" within the draft "needs to be weeded free." That he had begun to delete lines and individual poems from his working manuscript seemed to Wright to be "the clearest sign so far" that he was "learning what the new poetry *is*" and also that he had "obtained at least enough emotional strength to feel reassured about deletions." Sometimes that strength wavered, as manuscript drafts confirm. In that case, the poet fell back on the protectiveness of what I call the aesthetic rope-a-dope.

Aesthetic Rope-a-Dope

Among Wright's work, "A Blessing" has received nearly universal critical acclaim and captured innumerable anthologies' attention, including that of the hallowed *Norton Anthology of American Literature.* Norman Friedman goes so far as to say that "for sweetness, for joy, for precision, for rhythm, for eroticism, for structure, for surprise—for all of these things, this poem is nearly perfect."[6] Chapter 2 has already addressed the poem's central epiphanic incident. The speaker's and his friend's communing with Indian ponies invokes considerable ecstatic reverie—just the sort of thing for which a man might be subjected to much badgering by his buddies or by tough-minded critics. Here's a reminder of the crucial lines:

> *I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,*
> *For she has walked over to me*
> *And nuzzled my left hand.*
> . . . . . .
> *And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear*
> *That is delicate as the skin above a girl's wrist.*
> *Suddenly I realize*
> *That if I stepped out of my body I would break*
> *Into blossom.*

Here's what interests me. Even faced with what many regard as a poem "nearly perfect," Wright felt the aesthetic and emotional risks of publishing such an overtly Romantic poem in an era proudly draped in mordant skepticism. After the poem's acceptance by *Poetry,* Wright defensively revised the poem, replacing the "blessing" of its title, striking the speaker's touching of the horse's ear (and thus the merging of human and natural sensibilities), and recasting the final epiphany as the equivocating "Suddenly I think."

Though Wright may indeed have been "learning" what the new poetry was, his drafts reveal he's not yet resolute enough to stay the course. Instead, he engages in an aesthetic rope-a-dope reminiscent of Muhammad Ali, who'd slump against the ropes while covering his head and torso with his arms. While his opponent swung wildly, Ali would remain safe behind his

raised arms' protective wall. So, perhaps, would Wright, if he excised these lines from his poem. He'd not be wounded by conservative critics ready to count out the glass-jawed Romantic, those who'd rebuke him for his jejune communing with a horse. Wright had already covered up, removing the lines that left him most exposed.

To be sure, Wright's emerging aesthetic had much to do with *vulnerability,* a disposition of unguardedness that opened him to the possibility of ecstatic experience. To reject that possibility was to leave Wright mired in the old mode he was fervently seeking to adapt, evolve, or reject. An unpublished poem from *Amenities* illuminates how Wright risked vulnerability of a different fashion, hazarding his being labeled not only a hop-headed Romantic softie but also a political agent provocateur. "The Continental Can Company at Six O'clock" strikes a bold political stance by imagistically conflating the polluted Ohio River and the area's exploited workers, implying their mutual victimization at the hands of the wealthy and powerful. When the speaker observes workers driving away from a day's labor, he witnesses a pernicious transformation:

The faces fall down the ramp into the yard
Beside the river.
Headlights roil over the water,
And the faces divide into drops of blood,
That fall over the high voltage wires of the fence
Into the river.
The water darkens to red fire.
And the blast furnaces of Benwood are lunging at the sky,
Animals blinded with anger.
Suddenly the faces flood into one dark red face.
The hood of each car is a dark sloop bearing a coffin
Toward the river.
This is October, the restless flames of dead blow torches
Have scarred the wind.
Men are dying without ever knowing it.
America, America,
It is raining
In the river.[7]

No doubt Wright understood the conservative social climate of the early sixties, a buttoned-down scene yet to fracture beneath rock-tossing rebellions forged by the Civil Rights, antiwar, and youth movements. No doubt he recognized how the era's conservative poetic establishment would respond to the "high voltage" of his calling-out America by name, shaking the country's citizens by their limp shoulders, and imploring them to wake up to the sorry fate of workers chewed up and spit out by America's industrial base. In Wright's poem, the workplace itself is bestial, its workers bloodied by their day's labor. Worse yet, Wright's poem negates even the stereotypical escape of the workday's end, its promise of a cold beer and a warm supper. Instead, these workers head out the factory door to take the wheels of cars-become-boats-become-coffins, fated zombies unaware of their shared death-in-life. This striking image fashions a powerful statement about American industrialization and economic class, so one wonders why Wright never published the piece in journal or book form. Perhaps Wright may have mistakenly believed his volatile poem was simply not good enough. Just as likely, Wright judged the electrical charge from this poem was too hot to handle—another expression of Wright's plying the Aesthetic Rope-a-Dope.

The Nehru Jacket and a Tweed Sport Coat

What's notable here is how Wright's poems rejecting "academic" verse have now become emblematic of the very mode he sought to escape. For instance, critic Hank Lazer points to Wright's 1963 "image-oriented transformation" as displaying "his revulsion at abstract critical thinking" and the sort of imagistic "decorativeness" that also dominated the moment's work of W. S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, Bly, and numerous others. It's true Wright's work and that of his fellows was frequently pictorial, favoring personal epiphany and intuition over the prior New Critical era's penchant for rational modes of irony, tension, and paradox. In short, this was their works' aesthetic context. Like the era's fleeting affection for the Nehru jacket, the "Deep Image" and its counterparts became all the rage, an aesthetic fashion statement. The image poem's visual surface was meant to be strikingly fresh, for its outward presentation reflected an equally innovative inward reliance on intuitively connected images to convey states of awareness. In fact, the rhythm of such a poem was the rhythm of its images, suggested Robert Kelly in the little maga-

zine *Trobar*.[8] As with fascination with the Nehru, the image poem signaled a countercultural quest for mystical manners of being and seeing. Both the Nehru and the Deep Image offered an exterior sign of an interior state that stood in marked contrast to the then-dominant social and aesthetic order.

Deep Image poetry enacted its own mutiny against the status quo of academic verse. And Wright's version of this mode was strikingly political in tone and content, not unlike many of the more adventuresome poetries at play in our current moment. Still, to contemporary eyes the image poem may appear as quaint as the oddly collared Nehru. But only aesthetic myopia would see it as the establishment's tweed sport coat. Surprisingly, that is just what has happened. Today, this former poetry of rebellion is derisively dubbed "academic" or "workshop." For many such as Lazer, a generally intelligent critic, it has become an aesthetic expression of The Man, a mode complicit with realms of conservative power rejected by recent Language, feminist, slam, and performance poets outside the mainstream.[9] Ironically, Wright's aesthetic uprising has now been consigned to membership in the very dominant mode he refused to abide by. What's more, the terms of his rebellion—and his artistic choices—remain as febrile as they were nearly fifty years ago. Invoking the protectiveness of the aesthetic rope-a-dope would have done little to save him, then or now.

Rhetoric, Revision, and the Fumbled Line

Manuscript drafts also make known the keen attention poets must lend to individual lines. We readers love to see the poet fumble a bit on the way to a fluid line because we see in that small foundering our own struggles to say it right. There's an odd sort of satisfaction in knowing that what for the poet in the end appears so graceful (and thus seems to have come so effortlessly) in truth demanded casting and recasting. It's akin to sneaking a peek at Michael Jordan's lifting weights, running laps, sweating his way through dribbling drills, and practicing his daily three hundred three-pointers. Later, when he glides down the lane to hit the game winner, the triumph seems more earned than merely bestowed.

Wright's "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota" is a case in point when it comes to the poet's occasionally fumbling a single, crucial line. Variously revered or reviled for the way its quick flurry of nature images resolves in startling confession, "Lying in a

Hammock" emanates technical confidence and élan. It's the type of poem one simply can't imagine the poet having second thoughts about, especially its revelatory closing line. The head-spinning closer erupts volcanically, as if from the deepest realm of the poet's psyche. Tell me, though, how would one respond to the final line's lightning if it did not flare but merely blinked, as we have seen earlier in this version Wright first cast and then selectively crossed out:

I ~~seem to~~ have wasted my ~~whole~~ life.[10]

Wright was also working against his own technical competency as a formal poet, skill acquired by much study and attention to metrics, rhyme, and florid diction. Here's the opening lines of "The Mating of Dreams," an unpublished poem Wright tinkered with on "Aug. 18." (presumably 1960), as his handwritten notation indicates:

My savages both, so kind, so kind,
Blessed me deaf or blessed me blind.
Why did I hunt them not once more,
To feather my roof, to fang my door.

The poem as a whole continues in largely unremarkable fashion, so its having never appeared in journal or book form is perhaps a measure of Wright's own estimation of the poem's worth. However, his note to himself makes a finer point, as he frets about the poem's generalized way of saying nothing but doing so with superficial mechanical grace: "Do it again, but get rid of the rhymes and the purely 'technical' 'required' padding. Off with their heads!" Wright's openness before the merits and demerits of his own poem, gifted to readers via his handwritten dialogue with himself, provides specific context to the era's larger aesthetic wrangling.

That aesthetic wrangling is fleshed out in Wright's "The Barn in Winter" in an entirely different body. This time it is not a matter of cold metrical precision but of its near-poetic opposite—slack syntax and flat word choice. And if the earlier draft can be disparaged as amounting to mere verbal hubbub lacking any emotional investment, the March 6, 1962, draft following carries the polar burden of sensitive attachment to a precious locale and the people who inhabit it:

Robert Bly's barn is heavy with a million loose grains of corn.
He and Carol gathered them slowly, all day long last autumn,
Out of the smoky fields, that I love
Although they are not my home.

A hard critical eye, either the poet's or that of a trusted editor, would surely regard these lines as emotively honest but flaccid. Only the speaker's implicit sense of homelessness, whether real or imagined, charges the poem so it rises a bit above the aesthetic flat line. But for Wright, who had tossed aside well-wrought lines for fear of their vapid technical proficiency, these lines brought an uncommon satisfaction. Listen to the exposed remarks of a poet who was hardly ever pleased with a line he penned during those years of redefinition: "I like the above. . . . I love that barn full of corn—it is rich with Robert & Carol, with red-tailed squirrels, and with welcome. . . . I think the above typescript pleases me as I have been pleased by only 2 or 3 poems I have ever attempted to have done. It is thrilling to name beloved names in a poem."

Wright must have come to see that these lines loomed large with emotion but little else, as they remain unpublished. Even though these lines failed to make the poetic cut, in them Wright came to something keenly important to him as poet and human being—the electric rush he felt speaking loved ones' names in his poems. Over the remainder of his career, Wright spiced his poems with names of poets, friends, and places that he loved, so this key gesture of "The Barn in Winter," if not its actual lines, came to live on.

On a March 6, 1962, draft of the poem "A Small Elegy at Night in the Country," Wright puts the matter plainly: "To keep the issue clear: I would reduce the typescript above to a single line, if such would let the poem emerge. . . . I am not afraid to abandon rhetoric, but I still can't judge which is rhetoric & which is true imagination!" Later, Wright references another poet's hand in his redefinition of poetic self, pondering if he should show the draft to Bly. But Wright cautions himself that he can't "go on depending" on others, even fellow poets and dear friends, to make the decision for him. Every writer, he understands, stands alone before the page.

The aesthetic problem Wright makes clear is not so much a matter of syntax as a matter of rhetoric behind that syntax. Saying something mellifluously is not the same as saying what one means—or as saying too much in the process. Wright's politically charged "Eisenhower's Visit to Franco, 1959"

shows the pitfalls awaiting poets trying to learn to speak via poetic image and not through traditional rhetoric. That poet must risk the passivity of pictorial display and wager that the poem's images muscle enough weight to transport the reader to fresh awareness. If he fails, the poem becomes merely drab landscape, atmospheric at best. But if the poet's artistic nerve falters and he succumbs to outright statement, the poem pounds its political shoe upon the podium as the Soviet leader Khrushchev did to such poor result when visiting the UN. Few readers enjoy being subjected to a lecture, well-intentioned or not.

Wright's poem opens with the American president "having flown through the very light of heaven" only to find Franco awaiting him "in a shining circle of police." The dictator promises Ike "state police" will hunt down "all dark things" while the Spanish poet Antonio Machado, one of Wright's favorites, instead "follows the moon / Down a road of white dust." In image only, Wright has set the political stakes: while a beloved poet follows the redemptive moon, Eisenhower shakes hands with the fascist Franco, complicit in the dictator's bloody suppression of democracy. It's not Picasso's *Guernica,* but its message is similarly political. Here, the poem's closing images rebuke Eisenhower's unholy alliance:

Smiles glitter in Madrid.
Eisenhower has touched hands with Franco, embracing
In a glare of photographers.
Clean new bombers from America muffle their engines
And glide down now,
Their wings shine in the searchlights
Of bare fields
In Spain.

Wright understood the risks inherent in political poetry, the boring rants they often scream in the voice of the oppressor they seek to silence. In fact, on a September 1961 draft of the poem, Wright expressed his determination to avoid just that sort of shoe-thumping: "I must be careful not to yield too easily to *talk* and *statement.*" Still, for Wright the temptation to get in one last brickbat of rhetoric proved too tempting to refuse. One of the poem's many worksheets concludes by the poet's confessing what any good reader ought to have already decoded from the poem's images:

I am ashamed of my country.

Readers not drunk on politics' thinned gin wince at that line. The line's at once bland and outlandish. Nothing about its syntax raises the poem's ante, yet it spills the poet's cards face-up on the table. If anything, readers ought to take heart at Wright's overplaying his hand, cheered to learn they're not the only ones to have babbled when they should've been quiet. All in all, Wright's line-by-line reworking shows the perils of a poet's yielding not to his second but to his twenty-second thought. It also confirms the rightness of Paul Valéry's admission: "A poem is never finished, only abandoned." Ah, but to abandon the poem at the moment's equipoise of gain and loss—there's the rub.

Lightning Illumination

A poet's worksheets can lend insight into work that resists readers' best candlelit incursions. Some work by a poet is so fresh or simply so shockingly innovative that readers struggle to make sense of it in the old-fashioned thematic way, let alone understand its strange application of theoretical advancements. Readers admire writers who take risks of theory and application, but they also hanker to appreciate what's going on here and why. Wright's Deep Image poem "Miners" exemplifies the terms of this conundrum. Written in elusive and allusive imagistic sections, the poem's spider threads of association remain unseen to the inattentive reader's eye. Faced with its Deep Image mode, many readers conceivably throw up their hands and surrender.

1
The police are probing tonight for the bodies
Of children in the black waters
Of the suburbs.
2
Below the chemical riffles of the Ohio River,
Grappling hooks
Drag delicately about, between skiff hulks and sand shoals,
Until they grasp
Fingers.

3
Somewhere in a vein of Bridgeport, Ohio;
Deep in the coal hill behind Hanna's name;
Below the tipples, and dark as a drowsy woodchuck;
A man, alone,
Stumbles upon the outside locks of a grave, whispering
Oh let me in.
4
Many American women mount long stairs
In the shafts of houses,
Fall asleep, and emerge suddenly into tottering palaces.[11]

The poem's redefinition of the term "miners" and its social commentary initiate in the first section's assault on suburban values. Both the suburban kids and the polluted Ohio River might be said somehow to be victims of our culture and its capitalistic greed. But how they might be "miners" in the sense of those introduced in section 3 and what associations they have with American women awakening in "tottering palaces" probably elude the untrained reader. Likely, these notions sidestep many trained readers as well. Wright no doubt understood the risks. Once, perhaps a bit perturbed during an interview, Wright claimed the poem is in point of fact "extremely formal" in its use of "parallel" images.[12] That clue may help identify the poem's deployment of Deep Image poetics, but it hardly fingers the thread that links them.

Here's where literary manuscripts can prove to be invaluable. For readers, a poet's manuscript commentary can illuminate the poem in a lightning flash. In his characteristically pinched penmanship, Wright notes on a "Miners" worksheet these few words: "Two kinds of miners here: 1. real miners, a social class, a depressed social class, 2. spiritual miners." Given this gloss, even the most New Critical reader dismissing authorial intention will risk intuiting what links a depressed social class of miners with the socially well-off but spiritually impoverished suburban American mothers. Each seeks release from strictures both societal and economic. On another undated draft of the poem, Wright adds biographical commentary that further enriches the poem's context, noting this above the poem: "John Skunk, the 'professional diver,' in Martins Ferry when we were children. His name was always in the newspapers when somebody drowned & they had to 'drag' for the body."

Given these manuscript clues, readers now bring to their experiences with the poem a name to match the action it alludes to, a historical footnote that situates the poem's abstractions within the Ohio River's muddy waters.

These comments also offer broader context for Wright's poetry of social engagement. The poem depicts other citizens' struggles, not those of the speaker. Its socially relevant epiphany arrives within readers via their engagement with the poem's images, not through the speaker's self-aggrandizing pronouncement of expanded awareness, for the speaker makes no such declaration. In fact, the poem contains not a single "I" pronoun; its focus is not the poet's experience but that of his fellow Americans. Despite the needling of those who reprove Wright for his poems of self-epiphany—and indeed he wrote his share of those—Wright's scribbled manuscript notes on "Eisenhower's Visit to Franco" and "Miners" underscore the poet's larger communal concerns with politics and working-class life.

Diaristic Unmasking

One final element often present within writers' assembled manuscripts is their potential for exposing artists' personal and aesthetic struggles. In this way manuscript materials amount to a diary containing admissions of doubt or personal taste writers mostly keep to themselves. We readers relish the voyeurism of looking over the writer's shoulder as he or she spills out some untamed remark not meant for public consumption. We feel momentarily in on something, privy to a secret. The effect is to humanize an aesthetic issue that may seem otherwise merely abstract or ethereal—in effect, humanizing the poet as well. As Juri Lotman reminds us, the diary's purpose is for the "auto-organization of the individual," a way, essentially, for the diary writer to plot his or her journey through life. Wright's worksheets proffer a particularly apt example of such diaristic tendencies; throughout these materials Wright proved to be unguarded and vulnerable. In Wright's remarks regarding his own work and the frustrating process of poetic creation, readers encounter a brutally honest artist. Take, for instance, this assessment Wright scrawls across an undated draft of the poem "Twilight": "This is junk—a perfect specimen of 'contemporary' phoniness in America." What poet has not at one time thought something similar of her own work, but who has the temerity to write it down—even if it's meant only for her own eyes?

Wright's comments on his worksheets often pull back the curtain so

readers might gaze upon the puny man working the Great Wizard of Oz's levers, bells, and whistles. The poet whose many flamboyant poetic gestures seem to readers to exude self-assured swagger is instead unmasked as someone lost, searching, and wounded. In this way the poet serves as his own Toto, reducing the Wizard to mere artist in quandary. Since one is unlikely to share one's diary with another, these remarks would at first seem meant only for the poet's benefit. But then there's the matter of the poet's saving these worksheets as aesthetic documents sure to find their way into the hands of some critic, poet, or literary executor. Perhaps the need to speak to himself, maybe the part of himself not bound up in the quest of making a poem, is what fuels these confessions. If Wright the poet is thus bifurcated into artist-at-work and human-in-the-world, this dialogic conversation may well benefit both in their separate realms. The artist needs his twin's feet on the ground; the simple human being wishes for his other's feet in the air. Here's Wright on a March 6, 1962, draft of "A Small Elegy at Night in the Country," deliberating over the deletion of four lines from the poem: "Damn! That question! If I could truly answer it—I could become a poet. I would like very much to be a poet. I really would. . . . If the answer is yes [to cut the lines], then I am learning. If no, then I have to submerge again. But I should record the fact that I am happy to see and feel the problem!" Liberally spritzed with exclamation points, these comments come off as both emphatic and playful. Wright, of course, knows he's a poet. But he also realizes he's not yet the poet he wants to be. Still, he relishes the simple act of recording his progress along the way to his version of the "new" poetry. Keep in mind, dear reader, all of Wright's artistic angst, all this furor and hubbub, swirls around a poem that would never see its way into print. Any accountant would surely call for a cost/reward analysis of this and similar artistic expenditures. Luckily, the poet's bottom line resists quantification.

That Wright was rife with doubt about his aesthetic choices and his future as a poet seems clear to us now, given our access to these manuscripts. Back then, while Bly praised Wright's aesthetic renovation, Louis D. Rubin huffed that Wright's work "had gone way off on a tangent," chiding him for rejecting rational thinking in favor of imagistic mysticism.[13] It seemed to others Wright was under the influence of a powerful intoxicant—Robert Bly's literary guru–ism or some other bottomless aesthetic bottle. Still others wished ardently to believe Wright's artistic behavior radiated confidence and assurance. Tellingly, for them to judge so was also to trust in the gen-

eral principle of aesthetic sea change and in the particular possibility of its magic occurring in their own work. If Wright were to achieve *his* conversion experience, might not they hope for the same? Little did readers know then that Wright doubted his every aesthetic move, beginning with the decision to suppress *Amenities.* On the same May 21, 1962, draft of "Holding a Pearl," Wright further opens his literary trench coat: "I was afraid last summer that the withdrawal of the previous version of the book from Wesleyan might be just another neurotic, self-destructive move on my part. Well, the dread I felt was real—but I am so glad, so relieved . . . because the book that is still emerging from the deliberate wreckage of the old one is what I most deeply wanted to write in the first place." Faced with such exposed musings, might one ever again consider artistic certainty without invoking its twin—aesthetic doubt?

Our appreciation of Wright's achievement is augmented by our knowledge of his personal and aesthetic struggles. We know this mostly (and best) through the mining of Wright's literary manuscripts. Wright, it turns out, saved nearly everything, even his naked musings. These manuscript materials plot an aesthetic terrain where one powerful tectonic force slams against another, shaping Wright's work in explosive and lasting ways. Heaved this way by emotion, yanked that way by artistic invention, discovery, and surprise, Wright left readers a predigital GPS map of his turns, backups, and swerves, a route for a trip embarked upon only once. Here's it's useful to be reminded of David Baker's summary of critics' responses to Wright's journey of redefinition. Baker suggests Wright is viewed now as either "one of our age's great lyric poets" or a "sentimentalist and egoist."[14] Wright's awareness of what is at stake for him, as well as for any artist open to possibility, infuses his literary papers with elemental power—the bristling, electric energy of aesthetic risk. Wright's drafts and diaristic commentary make clear he understood the consequences of the redefinition he had undertaken, consequences that reverberate within his work and its critical reception to this day.

CHAPTER 9

Death by Zeroes and Ones

The Fate of Literary "Papers"

The widespread use of computer and digital media is transforming not only how poets compose their work but also how they preserve it, or fail to. Denizens of the digital age, we inhabit a historical moment where much exists only as codes of zeroes and ones. It stands to reason current literary manuscripts will likely be affected by technological innovation in ways we can't yet imagine, as technology—like rust—never sleeps. Its forward movement continually alters the terrain of art's creation and reception.

Consider how a poem's draft comes into being. Over the past three centuries, poets wrote by hand in ink and more recently in pencil. They plodded through however many drafts until the poem seemed to have revealed itself fully and tinkering with its imperfections seemed only to break things in new places. The poem was then said to be done, or as Paul Valéry tartly puts it, was ready only to be "abandoned" by its author. Poets would preserve their work as fair copies from which to read in front of a group, should that occasion arise, or to distribute among friends and patrons. Once book publication became the norm, poets' writing habits followed a fairly standard path from handwritten draft to typeset book copy, including as well the then-new stages of editorial revisions and authors' proofs.

When the typewriter appeared, poets mostly kept to handwritten first drafts and then moved, when the poem's solidity seemed to call for it, to the more tangible format of the typed page. Revisions on paper ensued, mostly in pen or pencil, the typed page itself accretively resembling a treasure map of arrows, cross-outs, additions, and the like. Most poets developed their own systems of revising the typed page, say, a circled word signifying one thing,

a cross-out meaning something else entirely. Once sufficient handwritten revisions appeared on the typed page, the poem was retyped, and that clean copy underwent the same process until the poem was "finished." The arrival of computerized word processing facilitated revision, making it faster and easier to revise on screen as well as to churn out fresh hard copy subject to even more amendment. As always, technological advancement brought with it unforeseen complications to the realm it was intended to simplify. These changes fundamentally altered not only the ways poets pursued their craft but also the means by which their work was made manifest to them and others.

For the last three hundred years, poems have enjoyed a tangible presence as they came into being through the poet's knuckled hand. No longer. Now many poets skip the handwritten stage altogether and compose directly at the computer's keyboard. Those that do begin by hand often move to the computer keyboard after a single draft, revising everything on the electronic screen as opposed to the paper plane of hard copy. So much of our lives nowadays revolves around a keyboard that this compulsion seems natural if not inevitable. When James Wright took a "typewriting" course at Kenyon College after World War II, he was ahead of the learning curve for most of those who did not envision careers in office or secretarial work. Today, most young folks are proficient computer typists by fifth grade, if not to please their teachers then better to accommodate conversations with their pals on AOL's Instant Messenger.

This writerly (and undeniably technological) decision to forego the handwritten and typewriter stages sends ripples through the creative process. One result is that the poem coming into being has no actual physical reality. There's nothing penciled on paper, nothing inked blotched and held up to the sun. Nothing to read, write on, curse, crumple, and toss across the room into the trash can. Now, the poem is merely digital code splayed across a glowing screen, and its reality is perilously momentary. Until the poet clicks "save," the poem does not possess a lasting (if purely digitalized) form. One wrong stroke on the keyboard or an unexpected power outage may mean the poem exists nowhere but in the writer's imperfect memory. Zapped into the ether, did it ever really exist? (A similar fate befell this essay, resulting in an afternoon's worth of lost revisions.) The poem merely flickers, its string of encoded zeroes and ones stored within a memory itself electrically charged and vulnerable to the hard drive's crashing—until the poet pushes "print."

Then out spews a neatly printed version, not perfect but enticingly perfectible. Still, one wonders how many draft poems live evanescent lives only upon the computer screen, deleted and thus disappeared with a quick click of a key. No draft—digital or otherwise—remains to testify to its brief electronic being.

Even if a version of the poem is eventually printed out, giving it physical reality, much of what was once part of the poem may never show up on that page. The ease of computer revision means so much of what is amended, deleted, or added appears only upon the pixeled screen. Imagine if T. S. Eliot had been a computer poet assiduously reworking his epic "The Waste Land" only on screen. If Eliot had tried ten different words to describe just what kind of month April is before landing on "cruelest," we'd never know. Even if the poet does choose to run off drafts, accustomed to hard copy as a revision mode, what decides how much revision necessitates a fresh hard copy? While changing a single line break hardly seems worthy of clean paper, how many adjectives replaced, phrases recast, or stanzas deleted in a working draft summon a new copy from the printer? For instance, would James Wright, were he working solely on computer, have simply deleted on screen the excess verbiage from the final line of "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," or would he have printed a fresh copy to consider the revised line's merits, as he did in typescript, crossing out the offending words ("I seem to have wasted my whole life")? Most poets, no doubt, develop their own standards for such things, and those who merit the label of literary pack rats might well save more than we readers care to see. But others, say, the tidy or the simply insecure, may print few if any drafts they regard as flawed.

Over time the production of fewer handwritten, typed, and computer-printed paper drafts could mean a reduction in what's typically available among writers' manuscripts for inclusion in library special collections. That may not be such a bad thing. Not everything in these stratospheric stacks merits keeping. After all, woodcutters heat their homes with their artistic flubs. (I know of a poet who yearly mails his cardboard-boxed "literary papers" to a library that buys them by the pound.) But the loss of permanence afforded by paper also means a concomitant loss of possibility, not only for the scholar but also for the poet. Where would Wright have recorded his characteristic diaristic commentaries on his poems if his working drafts were mainly digital not paper? How would we know he thought this piece to be "junk" and that

one he would cut to a "single line" were the true poem to emerge from his elisions? Those notions would possess the impermanence and privacy of daily musings, gone at sunset perhaps, and gone surely when he left this earth.

What eventually finds its way into literary archives may well be altered over time. Today it's the poet's worksheets, manuscripts, drafts, and letters—maybe even her notebooks and scribbled back-of-the-envelope verses. Given the current situation, however, one wonders if soon computer diskettes and flash drives will become germane to the notion of literary "papers." But keep in mind how quickly obsolescence overtakes technology once thought to be cutting edge. Now, who has the computer capability to read those once-ubiquitous 5½-inch floppy disks that writers of the 1980s regarded as both vanguard and permanent? Those media and their various technological progeny carry new poems and drafts that never made their way onto paper, so they ferry invaluable digital cargo. Sure, hard-copy drafts may be printed from each for storing in special collections, but what does it mean to take the original and present it in form the author never felt comfortable enough to give it? Maybe the poem as digital object must be retained as such. Of course, similar arguments could be made about typing up and printing a poet's unpublished, handwritten drafts—something a number of critics, myself included, have guiltily done. Perhaps what is saved in one form may be regarded as fair game to reproduce in another.

Such talk of hard versus digital copy itself skirts the larger issue of how composing and revising work on computer modifies the poet's fundamental creative process. Say, for example, does the effortlessness of computer revision actually encourage the poet to do *more* not less of it? Does the immediacy of computer writing enhance current poetry's increasing ellipticality, promoting what Tony Hoagland calls our era's "skittery" poem unwilling or unable to stay on topic? That feverish discussion is best left for another essay. Suffice it to say we are entering unfamiliar digital waters.

The ways poems are written and received will evolve dramatically over the next twenty years, so much so that the paper book as gold standard of publication might well be supplanted by some electronic gadget. For that to happen, the gadget will have to claim some of the book's physical and sensual charms in ways current electronic models, say, Amazon's Kindle, presently don't proffer. Even then, the electronic book may be something warmed to only over generations. I am not yet ready to mourn the book's imminent demise. Scribes copied books by hand for a century after Gutenberg.

Keep in mind, however, a new machine is now being marketed to the public that allows one to "rip" a hard-copy book into digitalized format at the rate of five hundred pages per hour. At a cost of sixteen hundred dollars (and requiring the additional purchase of two five-hundred-dollar Canon digital cameras), the Atiz BookSnap isn't cheap. And consumers may balk at the unwieldy process currently necessary to capture picture images of book pages and transfer them to a computer where specialized software enables the text to be read. Still, the invention may usher in a digital book Wild West fraught with possibilities as well as outlaws. Think of what havoc similar technology exacted upon the music industry, and it's not hard to imagine "ripped" books being shared among friends, distributed via the Internet, or downloaded in copyright-busting Napster fashion.[1]

If—or better when—the paper book loses its privileged position as both aesthetic creation and object, how might hard-copy literary manuscripts fare in this mix? Will hard-copy drafts become more valuable as they become rarer? Will libraries, as a result, pursue paper drafts with even more zeal than they do today? Or will poets' use as well as librarians' hoarding of paper drafts and manuscripts fall out of favor, tossed to the technological wayside like the LP album, eight-track player, audio cassette, and eventually even the CD—anachronistic and shamefully old-fashioned? If so, the current era's obsession with saving paper manuscripts may be notable for its brevity as much as its intensity. Paper drafts are going unborn daily in each poet's sun-washed study.

We should remember that not all poets are inveterate savers. Some just toss away their drafts and worksheets as matter of habit. It's either cleanliness or privacy at work. If the latter, those poets probably regard their papers to be as private as their privates, things meant to be seen by intimates only. For example, among the several thousand Wallace Stevens items housed in the Huntington Library, no worksheets are to be found. Stevens may have been both cleanly *and* private. Whatever the case, the current burgeoning of literary manuscript holdings faces an approaching challenge and redefinition. Scholars and librarians must learn to recognize manuscript materials among the new media blink-blinking in the digital blue. Given poets' changing work habits and technology's evolving means of creation, those things we now think of as draft, worksheet, and manuscript may fade like stars at sunrise.

SECTION THREE

On Teaching & the Writer's Workshop

CHAPTER 10

The Hammer

By the third week of workshop I knew something was amiss. For one, the classroom was bone still when I arrived, that mortuary quiet without the dearly departed's body, a heater's full-throttle rattle sputtering chill air never warmed just pushed from floor to ceiling and back again. Students had formed the obligatory circle that flattens out to something oddly football shaped. By the time I arrived, they'd already distributed the week's poems. That, it turns out, was the problem. As always, workshop members had quickly scanned the week's offerings and, in doing so, noticed what I'd overlooked or discounted or whatever slip it is when one disregards something as familiar as the drive home's two rights, a left, then left at the T.

There, for the fourth straight week, Peter, I'll call him Peter, had submitted a poem featuring a man alone at the kitchen table with a statue of the Virgin Mary adorning the terry tablecloth, a half-gone bottle of Jack Daniels, the light above the sink offering up its forty-watt despair to match the pistol cocked and ready. Metaphor, this I'd read as richly detailed metaphor, or as the deft creation of persona, the self one is not in body and momentarily so only in mind. This, I'd thus read simply as good writing.

There's the rub. So often when we ponder violence in the creative writing workshop we think à la Columbine of fiction writers playing out their dream revenge in hackneyed but bloody prose. Poets are another story, something on the order of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poet-icon falling upon the thorns of life only to bleed lonely. If the work of student fiction writers often exhibits violence toward others, poets, to the contrary, frequently turn that violence inward toward the self. For poets, the dreamed-of victim lives within

their own skin. If it's vengeance they want to exact, too often it's vengeance against the self.

This workshop experience caused me to rethink my own assumptions, my own expectations of student poetry. I began to wonder whether I—like a lot of creative writing teachers—had been professionally if not also culturally inscripted to expect and thus accept depression, moodiness, anomie, and isolation as stock poetic subject matter. The postmodern version of Shelley's "I fall upon the thorns of life" may involve more bytes than bites, more chat room, YouTube, MySpace, and grunge band than philosophical discourse, but the song is sung in the same key of loss and confusion. At the risk of stereotype, aren't these students, after all, the ones most likely to have suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous high school fortune—artists among the gaggle of jocks and prom queens? These the kids in faded black frocks, their faces acne's ripe orchard?

In college the terms had changed but perhaps not the climate. There, sororities and frats added their own pastel and button-downed storms, new ways to get rained on without the umbrella of family to lessen these students' despair. On a campus like mine, a medium-sized Midwestern comprehensive university, the nuances of that culture are literally Greek to many creative writing students. It's a language of attachment and immersion they can't read or, given the handcuffing terms of membership, don't want to. Every day they're reminded of their outlier status as they trundle along the quad among the ones with neon ΑΧΩ or ΣΧ emblazoned on their chests, shorthand for the in crowd. For many, that's a good part of the reason they're enrolled in creative writing workshops—as much to find compadres as to find their inner souls in verse.

And what of my assumptions, aesthetic or not? Had I been conditioned to assume that to be a poet, especially a young poet, is to learn to sense one's essential human loneliness and to explore it, perhaps even to revel in it? Wasn't that what my teachers, well meaning or merely foolish, had expected of me when I began the arcane study of Sonnets to Free Verse 101? Hadn't they applauded my somber musings and dismissed anything with a schmidget of humor? "Poetry is serious business," the tweed jackets admonished, and in their dour classrooms, it was. Given the subsequent rise of MFA programs and the risk of further lockstop aesthetic inhering in them, it's no wonder poets who explore humor in their work are regarded with suspicion by many other poets. It's no surprise those same poets of humor magnet

public readership like iron filings. Maybe it's a thoughtless attraction, a compulsion difficult to refuse and thus primal, a longing hard to articulate, but it says something about what the reading public looks for but doesn't often locate in contemporary poetry. When they find it, they buy Billy Collins by the armfuls.

A short litany of my own students' typical topics includes the much-mourned abortion, drug and alcohol experimentation, lonely bouts with social misfitism and grudges against the oh-so-cool crowd, a slew of sexual misadventures and condomless encounters, as well as the apparently harmless Ted Kaczynski rant against that mechanistic and capitalistic culture of *thems* who won't or can't understand the sensitive and intuitive *us*. Now, which one of them is likely to do the greatest social harm? Which one do I, as creative writing instructor, fink on to the authorities? Which one would you finger for the administration?

The issue, of course, invokes basic First Amendment rights, privacy concerns, and fundamentals of freedom of expression any workshop instructor ought to hold sacred. However, it also involves something more fragile and less legally defensible: student trust. When students *share,* that awful pop-psychology term, share their secrets—whether wholly true or apparently invented—the instructor is both welcomed into and implicated in their emotional lives. Isn't the instructor too often the one urging them to risk, risk, risk, to delve deeper, to find what their hearts want to say? Aren't (too?) many poets still dismantling Eliot's brickhouse "Impersonal Theory of Poetry" that lectures us to be "universal" not private poets. Aren't many rebelling against this long-gone literary daddy? Aren't many thus unwittingly urging students to be like us—to be, in effect, personal if not altogether "Confessional" poets?

When instructors nag students to air their personal and familial dirty laundry, to risk much, to reveal their "true" selves, they unmask their own assumptions about selfhood and identity. They parade their own belief in the self as knowable and constant. Knowable perhaps, though momentarily, and surely not constant. For many poets, teachers, and students who set themselves in opposition to this confessional mode of writing, the unknowability of the self and the inherent ambiguity of language offer the unintended allures of Language poetry. Language poetry seeks cultural as opposed to personal voice. Language poetry's emphasis on the playfulness and minutiae of language, on theoretical matters of linguistics and philosophy, on cultur-

ally shared language and idea, on *public* culture, for goodness sake, nicely preempts students from meditations on Daddy's late-night meanderings or Mommy's pill-popping.

So what did I do? I talked to Peter after class, a how's-it-going conversation halfway to the Student Union in February snow. Campus deserted at dusk, our footprints trailed us like a map of where we'd been, boot-shaped emptiness filling up the present become past. Ahead lay unbroken white, neither of us in a hurry to get there, wherever *there* is. I ached to be off-the-cuff profound. He ached, I reckon, for me to finish. After all, he'd a Taco Bell shift awaiting him, as well as the first customer's grande burrito he'd purposefully botch so it might be reborn as his own free dinner, extra jalapeños promising their gut-wrenching singe. So I sounded like my father. Peter sounded like my father. Handshakes all around.

Later that week, I scouted out his fiancée and did the same. His scrum of friends too. Nothing out of the ordinary came from any of it. Even the folks in Counseling and Wellness suggested Peter's work was merely cathartic and thus probably healthful. Isn't that what every creative writing instructor secretly wants to hear? Such a remark proffers its twin blessings on the silver platter of relief: How nice to know the student isn't in trouble and is, in fact, by writing doing what will hasten the return of happiness and well-being. How nice, as well, to avoid hauling out the ropes and pulleys often needed to persuade a student to seek help. That hardware involves men and women in business suits, cops in blue, and papers in triplicate.

Even what I learned then about the counseling process gave me reason to delay action. As it turns out, university counselors have real power to act in what they believe is the student's best interest. In fact, alerting counselors to a potential student problem initiates a chain of events the creative writing instructor is wholly incapable of halting. If, for example, I were to suggest Peter had a serious problem, a counselor might meet him at the door of his classroom and begin assessing him right there. First comes the request for voluntary conversation. If that's rejected, the counselor, if a registered psychologist, can require office consultation. If that's refused, the psychologist can, if she or he feels it's necessary to protect the student or others, immediately hospitalize the student against his will. This happens on average five times a year at my university. That fact creates within me a quandary I'm not necessarily happy to own up to. While I'm grateful such a program exists for students who need it, I'm not entirely comfortable with being the one who—

without proper training in counseling—embroils a merely moody student in the byzantine process to prove he or she is not clinically depressed.

Still, the incidence of serious mental illness among college students has risen markedly in recent years. A study conducted in the mid-1990s by a Harvard Medical School researcher shows that a shockingly high 39 percent of college students experience a mental disorder in any given year. Of course, in this case "mental disorder" may range from severe schizophrenia to a problem with binge drinking. At my university, the perennial "top ten" student mental health concerns vary little from year to year—including depression, alcohol and drug use, romantic or familial relationship difficulties, eating disorders, and the omnipresent but amorphous category of stress, which, of course, can either fuel or be fueled by all of the above. These problems can lead to devastating results. The 2006 National College Health Assessment reported 43.8 percent of nearly 100,000 students surveyed "felt so depressed it was difficult to function" during the previous year. Of them, 9.3 percent had "seriously considered suicide" during that period. Earlier, a late-1990s study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had found similarly that 1 in 10 college students had seriously considered committing suicide. Morton Silverman, a suicide researcher who directed the student counseling service at the University of Chicago, says suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students. Only accidents take more student lives.

To gain some measure of the problem, consider these figures from my school. Each semester, roughly 250 students seek help for their mental health concerns at the university counseling center. Including summer referrals, then, the number rises to 500 students per year seeking such help. At a university of roughly 5,000 undergraduates, that means 1 in 10 of our students face mental health problems severe enough for them to look for professional help. Worse yet, mental health experts contend many university health services are ill-prepared to deal with the number and scope of students' mental illnesses. Counselors are often untrained to deal with grave clinical problems, and those who are find themselves deluged with students in need. For our 5,000 undergraduates, only three full-time professionals are available to students. The matter has raised such concern that the university has recently hired a psychiatrist to serve students' needs, though at the minimal offering of four hours per week. None of this encouraged me to refer Peter to the counseling center on the basis of writing work that mildly disturbed his classmates and me. I'd seen worse over the years.

Four weeks later, Peter upped the ante. At workshop he refused to speak in class. In fact, he refused to join our circle of desks, instead sitting off by himself staring blankly out the frosted window as if looking for a sign in the crystal scrim. When I asked him to join us, he refused. I asked again. No. The stalemate ended when he slunk from the room without a word. Maybe he got the sign he'd looked for in the frosted glass. Next meeting he was there early, saving a seat for me and one for his propped-up backpack through which he'd looped a waffle-headed framing hammer. The heavy, this-is-serious-business hammer used to frame walls, rafters, joists. The kind, I knew from experience, which cramps the forearm by midday the first week or two, until you get the single-sided Popeye forearm necessary to swing it all day with impunity. Last time I hefted one for pay, the builder—really, three college guys on summer vacation—slammed a room on the back of a ranch house, a rectangle splinted onto a rectangle. A rectangle for a guy's elderly mother to shuffle through on her way out the door and beyond, a rectangle that would make a fine TV room when she'd gone to her reward. Most times you'd call it a "family room," but this guy, a grade school teacher and basketball coach, had none but mom. After we'd framed and wired, and before we hung drywall, I'd dropped a poem of mine in an empty Budweiser bottle and placed it inside the two-by-four frame plate. A poem about Candy, the fiancée who'd riven my heart by sleeping with a blond and muscled Lambda Chi. Ah, again those Greek letters. Hey, they did *around the world* on their first date, he told everyone who'd listen, while she and I, three years along, were strictly missionary. A poem greasy as bacon and self-pity, rhyming couplets stained by stale beer.

Come winter, the job long done, I'd imagine that bottled poem glowing like a lost and feverish firefly inside the coach's wall, signaling its need and readiness to a mate who'd never see it. I'd imagine it so bright with untutored yearning his mother didn't need a night light to make the john safely. Mom long dead by now, the coach himself in the November of his years, probably still alone though I hope not, he falls asleep to Leno-now-Conan-now-Leno, my failed romance walled within his.

All this I pondered via Peter's hammer, in the millisecond that spans the life of physic's quarks, things so small we can't see them though they're there—say, the love soured in my own mopey twenty-year-old gut, stale beer inside a wall, that phantasm called "self." Everything and nothing made sudden sense. My university offers a construction engineering major, but the class roster, and Peter himself, said his was history. Russian history.

What's more, his week's poem was again set in the kitchen, with bottle and terry tablecloth but no gun. In its place was the waffle-headed framing hammer. The Virgin Mary appeared anew, though this time she seemed more flesh than statue where she lay crumpled on the table.

In that moment, Peter embodied a terrible triad of possible violence: violence toward the self, violence toward others, and violence toward authority—toward the instructor. Yes, the teacher is at risk too, for the professor is the giver of grades, the one who has the temerity to suggest revision of his dearest art, his deepest secret expression, the one who undercuts the very thing he believes gives him life, originality, selfhood—the inviolable part of him unsullied by a crass, unforgiving world. If even a math student at staid Purdue can get riled enough to shotgun his dissertation director, you can bet a Shakespeare first edition that a student poet can do the same.

Sure enough, we've all had students who made it clear they didn't like us at all, or those who in fact liked us too much—whose crush buzzed around the office like bee to honey. That too can get out of hand. A friend teaching in Indiana had a student stalking him on his walk home, hiding like a foolish moose behind a maple, her purple backpack bulging beyond the tree trunk's thin waist. She also emailed twice a day, writing five-page, single-spaced rants, and left phone messages cursing the names of his friends she'd garnered from his books' acknowledgments pages. It was like some Hitchcock film, he said, or that Stephen King book he's never read, the one they made a movie starring Kathy Bates, though he's never seen it either. Most teachers get used to being hated by some students, but loved—and loved excessively, inordinately, spookily—that's another story. Such love can be more potent and dangerous than hatred.

When what seemed a twelve-hour workshop molassesed closed that late afternoon, I talked to Peter about his poems and what they said, if anything, of his life. I talked to him about the hammer, a call for attention not to be overlooked by even the most ardent supporter of the First Amendment or student/instructor trust. He fessed up. His world had flat collapsed like his birthday's fallen angel food cake. All that work and nothing to show for it, he muttered. He spoke of his parents' peculiar charms, his grandparents' clumsily raising him, his fondness for the word "caca"—babytalk for shit—how the Virgin and caca came to be inextricably tethered in his mind. You get the picture. The planets happily aligned, so I was graced with the good sense to nod a lot. I was not profound. Handshakes all around.

Here's the thing, a gnawing rodent that has pestered me incessantly and dirtied my life's clean kitchen floor these last eighteen years: Anymore, I can't say for sure Peter actually had that hammer. In the intervening years, its wallop has grown increasingly surreal and temptingly metaphoric. It blurs around the edges like movie or dream. Events are muddied by Peter's angry and verbally abusive behavior toward other workshop students and me, by my students' own privately conveyed misgivings about Peter's writing and attitude, and by Peter's penchant for bizarre subject matter. He had "the whole package," as coaches say of their most gifted star players, but his came in all the wrong ways. Or was it all the right ways to make my students worry about and perhaps fear him? In short, the scene gets fuzzy for me as it does for the lone witness to a traffic accident. I wonder if the light had really gone from caution to red.

When I talk of Peter, my wife tells me he always gave her "the creeps." All of us think we know what that means, but what, really, does it purport? What good is saying something like that when trying to explain one's concerns to the school shrink? I tell Peter's story not because I handled it well. I didn't. I should've been more aggressive, talking to him early on and perhaps urging him to seek help. I tell it because his story embodies for me many perils of violence that instructors face in the creative writing classroom. There, chin deep in the emotional lives of our students, we can't always hide behind discussions of form or mere technique. ("That's a wonderful line break, Peter, there where you say—'I sliced the loaf of / her throat.") Inevitably, we're forced to roam terrain that professors of math and physics and engineering—like proverbial angels—never have to tread. For good or ill, we must be prepared to face hard questions about students' emotional health. While I talked to Peter that afternoon, I wondered who I'd be most likely to fink on, to violate the student's trust—for his good or that of others and myself? Who would I most readily turn in—the student who might hurt others, the student who might hurt me, or the one who might hurt himself? And, more confounding, which of these is easiest to recognize and which simplest to persuade others that a problem exists? These questions grow thornier when one remembers that mental health is a thing not easily seen—the human quark, the sappy poem bottled within a wall.

This much I do know. Reader, that hammer changed everything for you, didn't it? You were certain then that Peter needed help and that you had to intervene. That hammer—there in wood and steel, or there only in meta-

phor his writing provided—did the same for me. It's enough to make me pine for an outward sign of inward emotional distress, something quick and sure and identifiable. Something like this: students with hammers, students without.

The good though not graced news is that Peter sought counseling voluntarily, later married his fiancée (though I harbor my worries), a wedding to which I was invited. In the steamy, mid-July air, Groom, Best Man, and assorted tuxed Ushers had formed a football- shaped circle within a grove of shagbark hickory, a workshop circle of their own. What they passed around was not a poem but a reefer—industrial sized and smoking like a wet campfire—the few words they spoke pinched through clinched teeth and punctuated with coughs that make the eyes bloodshot watery. Unlike the polyester suits spilling from minivans, folks who missed this pre-wedding show in the rush for a good pew, I watched intently. Peter and his best man peeled the shagbark's loose tongues of bark and flung them at the other, each ducking the too-slow duck of the stoned. These bark-tongues spoke the language of friendship. Giggling their goofy cackle, those guys trusted each other's bad aim or good intentions. Nobody passed a bottle of Jack or the shiny flask one of them had to have on his hip. We all enter marriage in an altered state, flush with hormones and adrift in a pheromone cloud, so big deal that Peter's entry was more hemp than sensuous pomp. And while I'm not about to recommend intoxicants of any variety, I'll admit a certain pleasure at seeing Peter, this guy allured if not by violence then by violence's allure, speaking such a sweetly passive dialect of hand and heart. As I stood transfixed, like a kid who'd somehow caught an R-rated trailer before the Disney movie, Peter spotted me through the smoke and low-slung hickory branches. With his index finger, he motioned me over, and I, doing my best to look coolly knowing, waved him off, "No, not this time."

There would be, of course, no other time. I never saw or spoke to him again. The reception was a family affair, and my young daughter's stiff dress had chafed her legs enough for one day. We left before the music cranked up. He went on to pursue a graduate degree at another institution, dabbling in the poetry and impoverished literary politics that swirl around a big-time university magazine before it flushes everyone and everything down the drain. Glub, glub. Later he and his wife moved west, edge of country and continent, from where his emails blinked infrequently until, like the light above the kitchen sink, they suddenly gave out.

Coda

This essay, written eight years before 2007's tragic shootings at Virginia Tech, fell off the shelf and slumped on the couch with me as I watched the televised mayhem that April day. It hounded me as I chased my poetry workshop that afternoon. It sipped my break time smoothie and goosed the gas pedal as I drove home, eager to see my wife and son. It dialed the cell phone when I called my college-aged daughter a day before her birthday, she secure in her fourth-floor dorm room half a continent away from the incomprehensible scene. It smacked me upside the head when NBC, spouting journalistic obligation, excerpted Cho Seung-Hui's videotaped victimhood proclamation and his chilling photographs. It shuddered with me, our shiver of arctic clarity, when I saw that snapshot of The Hammer raised in Cho's clenched hands. Metal as cold and unblinking as his eyes.

At Virginia Tech, many fellow classmates claim the first time they heard Cho speak was in his chilling videotape. He had said nothing in class, the dorm, or elsewhere on campus. That's not surprising. While a student in Westfield High School in Chantilly, Virginia, Cho had earlier exhibited the same eerie silence in the classroom. As a result, he had been diagnosed with "selective mutism," an anxiety condition in which one declines to speak. Alarmingly, as Daniel Golden suggests, Cho "didn't have to talk to succeed academically at Westfield" because his condition brought with it assignment to special education status due to "emotional disturbance." Cho was given a pass on all forms of oral participation in the classroom—a dispensation that included assignments such as oral reports, as well as any obligation to answer teachers' classroom questions. As Cho earned marks of A and B, the school system promoted him up through the ranks. Still, the yardstick used to judge his progress in school was purely academic. In short, the system rewarded Cho's bookish proficiency while largely ignoring his emotional health.[1] Ironically, this was the one area where Cho's earning a failing mark would eventually bring disastrous consequences. In what ways was the system thus serving Cho and society, preparing him to function as a stable and productive citizen of the world?

As it turns out, Cho's high school had urged his parents to provide counseling for their son. The family contacted a "dedicated therapist who cared about [Cho] deeply and worked with him one-on-one at a culturally sensitive

location," according to Hollis Stambaugh. Golden also asserts Cho received "50 minutes of language and speech therapy a month on site," a paltry commitment that seems hardly sufficient given the severity of Cho's emotional disturbance. Golden traces the series of "accommodations" made by school officials in Cho's case, including requiring teachers to meet one-on-one with Cho outside of class and exempting Cho from group or class discussions. Cho's special education status—and all the attendant accommodations—followed him through his two years at Westfield High. At university, these accommodations can be continued only at the student's request. Apparently, Cho did not seek this designation and its accommodations once he entered Virginia Tech, so these terms expired. As Stambaugh remarks, "You do get the sense that [such students] are carried along to a certain point, and then they fall off the cliff."

Apparently, some measure of the turmoil that Cho, suffering from selective mutism, could not speak aloud to others instead found voice in his creative work at Virginia Tech. There, Cho expressed anger that was palpable if not wholly explicit. In fact, English Department chairperson Lucinda Roy—at the behest of Cho's instructor—chose to remove him from a writing workshop and then to teach him one-on-one. She disallowed violent topics and urged him to seek counseling. Roy says she felt at the time Cho had "tired" of hearing such advice. In the past that bureaucratic process flagged his case to mental health professionals. But it had failed him, and he had failed it.

In other workshops, Cho baldly exhibited his fondness for "twisted" subjects, especially in a playwriting course. Those plays incorporated episodes featuring an array of unusual weaponry employed in shocking ways, so much so classmate Ian MacFarlane appeared on CNN to label the work "very graphic" and "extremely disturbing." MacFarlane says that before Cho's arrival in class one day concerned classmates fretted out loud that Cho's writings suggested he might be capable of being a "school shooter." While one worries that such remarks have the 20/20 vision of past tense, MacFarlane's comments highlight the unease students can experience when confronted with a fellow classmate's sadistic writing—even within a locale that promotes (and depends on) free creative expression. That very locale is often where the troubled student either feels free to expose his inner turmoil or is simply unable to contain it. A 2002 Secret Service study concluded that more than one third of school shooters "exhibited an interest in violence in their own writings, such as poems, essays, or journal entries."

Late that April evening, I emailed poet Bob Hicok, who teaches creative writing at Virginia Tech, hoping to confirm his safety. I emailed my creative writing colleagues to counsel them not only to avoid overreacting to these events but also to consider each student's well-being and security. One colleague wrote back to say, in effect, "Chill out." The vast majority of our students were relatively happy, well-adjusted young folks—not roadside bombs primed to explode in our unsuspecting laps. He made a solid point. Another colleague responded, "Listen, I understand this all too well."

The latter, in a follow-up email, reminded me she'd once asked the department chairperson to dismiss a student from her workshop for bizarre classroom behavior and for writing threatening journal entries. The student, it turns out, had written and submitted to workshop lengthy journal entries describing how he planned to stalk and kill a writing instructor. His victim was an African American woman who lived on _____ Street and drove a _____. Alarmingly, this profile matched hers. His prose paraded macabre and sordid elements not found in his other assignments, and it seethed with sexual aggression. Was this merely an exercise that fired the student's creative boiler, superheating his usually tepid writing? Or was it instead an expression of evil intent, perhaps an unconscious sign of deeper troubles?

What's notable is how such an issue has secured the public's fascination. While poetry may be benignly overlooked by the larger media culture and creative writing workshops are regarded by many as black denim playgrounds, the issue of students' dark writings foreshadowing their violent acting-out has earned considerable airtime and print space. Even the *Wall Street Journal,* hardly a bastion of literary or pedagogical concerns, has devoted several articles to the subject. More than a year after the Virginia Tech tragedy, the *Journal* featured the story of Steven Barber, a twenty-three-year-old who was expelled from Wise College (Wise, Virginia) after his disturbing fiction prompted concerns by faculty and administration. That concern instigated a search of Barber's car and apartment, resulting in the discovery of three guns for which Barber held permits as well as a concealed carry permit. Further complicating matters, Barber was subject to expulsion for a classroom assignment that was, at his instructor's request, meant to be imaginative. His instructor, Christopher Scalia, son of Supreme Court judge Antonin Scalia, shuddered to see Barber's creative piece make reference to the class, to its assignments, and to the murder of a professor named Mr. Christopher, a surname that mirrors his own first name. Neither Barber's prior semester 3.9

grade point average or his status as an Iraq War navy veteran could overcome the perception he was a danger to himself and others—despite a local psychiatric hospital's subsequent examination of Barber and doctors' declaration he was sane and no danger to anyone. Free speech and student safety thus ride the same rails and often collide head-on.[2]

My colleague faced the very issue Cho's and Barber's instructors had stared down, each school choosing to respond differently to the matter. And both incidents possess parallels to my own earlier dilemma. Does one fink to the administration, or does one support poetic license? In the volatile, sometimes volcanic landscape of the creative writing workshop, is it impossible to do both? Fortunately, my colleague's situation played out to everyone's satisfaction. Her student agreed to finish the workshop with another instructor, the remainder of his semester's creative work ploddingly unremarkable. He courted a girlfriend, graduated, and disappeared into the mid-May mist of the quad where lawn sprinklers arc here and there, sunlight casting gorgeous if artificial rainbows.

CHAPTER 11

Voice

What You Say and How Readers Hear It

No aspect of poetry writing is more fundamental to the art—and yet more thorny to define—than *voice.* Critics give us a slew of technical terms meant to delineate subtle shades of difference in how poets use and how readers respond to voice. Poets, on the other hand, speak of it in hushed tones tending to beatify the mysterious process of "finding your voice." In truth, most poets own little idea how they came to find the voices their readers recognize immediately as those poets' own, as distinctly Robert Bly's, or Anne Sexton's, or Frank O'Hara's. The usual bromides—read widely, write daily, risk daringly—seem just that: meaningless patter meant to keep the learner in the proverbial dark. Still, the good news, and the bad, is that finding one's voice really is a long trip in an ill-tuned Yugo, a journey that asks you poets to read, write, revise, and think about writing and think about thinking about writing.

What is voice? I'll avoid hairsplitting technical terms in favor of simplicity: voice is how you, the poet, speak a poem. Of course, such a seemingly simple thing as how you speak a poem involves a gaggle of choices and decisions, some of them conscious and some of them not. Most folks will agree that voice involves two basic components: (1) *subject matter,* that is, what you choose to talk about in the poem, thus, what matters to you and, just as important, how and why it's come to matter, and (2) *tone,* how you feel about the specific subject of the poem and your audience, as well as how you feel about yourself and the world in general. Big stuff, to be sure.

One helpful way to consider such an unwieldy subject is to appreciate the beautiful duality of the term "voice." When we think of voice, we most

often fall upon the literal sense of the word—the actual physical and auditory sense of spoken voice and language. Still, poets concern themselves equally if not more with the metaphorical sense of voice: what poets talk about in a poem, the language they use, their attitude toward the world and their place in it. When you've read enough poets, you'll find yourself able to identify a poem you've never heard simply by paying attention to these issues of subject matter and tone: Oh, you'll say, there's Dickinson again contemplating death in her short, tight line, or there's another Sharon Olds poem openly grieving her father's death with strangely lush, almost sensual language. You'll *hear* a poem the way you *see* an unfamiliar painting, one so obviously cubist it must be Picasso's. In fact, most of you already do this with popular music. You know halfway to the chorus the song's by Kanye or Marley or O.A.R. At first the sound of the voice may clue you, but after a while you notice the consistency of subject or attitude, the kinds of things the singer chooses to sing about and his/her feelings about those things. Maybe something similar has already happened to you. Say, you've shown friends a new poem, and they've remarked, "Oh, that's just like you to write about your European trip by gushing about Italian waiters and the erotics of foreign toiletry." If so, you've begun to develop and to exhibit a personalized sense of subject matter and tone.

Keep in mind this voice your poem presents needn't always be your personal voice, laden with your own opinions and concerns. It need only seem believably human and real, like that of a real person speaking about matters that concern him or her. You can always concoct a *persona* or mask and thus speak the poem as if you were Winston Churchill, Nelson Mandela, or your own mother. Why not, for that matter, violate the very rule I've set down earlier and speak the poem as someone or something not human but surprisingly close to it—perhaps Mr. Ed the talking horse of television sitcom fame?

Above all else, a poem's voice establishes a relationship among speaker, poem, and reader. Readers respond to speakers—and thus to poems—that convey an urgency in the way they talk. Readers want to believe speakers have something meaningful to say to them, and they respond most passionately to speakers who do so using memorable language, image, emotion, and thinking. More than anything else, a poem's voice—its subject and tone—determines how readers feel about the speaker and in turn how they feel about the poem. This accounts for advice like that Aristotle gives writers in

his *Rhetoric.* There Aristotle urges prospective writers to make readers care about them as humans, to display aspects of *Ethos* and *Character* in their work that will encourage readers to admire them as persons and thus to be more likely persuaded by their arguments. The poet W. B. Yeats, however, distrusts this notion of rhetoric applied to a poem. He suggests that while rhetoric is an argument with another person, true poetry is an argument with the self.

How then to make a poem's voice cause readers to feel they are witnessing, and perhaps partaking in themselves, a passionate argument with the self? How to make a voice so authentic readers believe the speaker brims with humanity, the electric mix of flaws, foibles, and desires we recognize as human? How do you make readers succumb to an experience very much like falling in love with a voice on the telephone? You know, the person never seen or touched whose voice exudes such vibrant energy we easily imagine eyes, lips, hair, the curve of waist and thigh, laughter supple and intelligent.

One way to learn to do so is by trying on other poets' voices, as poet Theodore Roethke suggests in "How to Write Like Somebody Else." Roethke believes poets come to find their own peculiar voices by trying to learn to speak a poem in the manner of great poets. Read widely, the story goes, and once you find a poet you like, then mimic that poet's subjects, language, and form. One month W. H. Auden, the next Gwendolyn Brooks or John Donne. Try to discover what it is that makes that poet so unique, so distinguishable from others. None of these voices, of course, will fit you like your favorite pair of jeans. Your voice, like those jeans, is something unique fashioned by wearing it over time. With effort and faith, you'll gradually abandon or subsume those other voices as you shape your own.

Not everyone, however, agrees it's possible literally to "find" your voice. Philip Levine, for instance, thinks young poets spend altogether too much time worrying about this quest. Levine cautions: "I never tell younger poets to find their own voice because I don't believe that's how voice comes to us. Once a poet discovers what his material is, his voice will come to him. The best thing is to practice good writing until you've got something to say so urgent it's got to be said. . . . I don't think anyone ever found his own voice, it found him." Find first what you *must* talk about, Levine argues, and your voice will come along in the bargain.

What makes the matter of voice so frustrating is the simple fact it can't be taught. Your teacher might be able to give you exercises to sharpen your use of metaphor or image, for example, but no teacher I know can lead you to

your voice by dint of classroom assignment. Voice isn't a technique, a trick, or even a skill. It's nothing less than the way you feel about yourself and your world, all that music plucked through the strings you choose to speak those feelings and ideas. Voice is individual and unique, a fingerprint in language. Voice speaks the world through your lips, and hearing it, readers understand it is yours and yours alone.

To get a feel for the matter, let's look at some poems written not by well-known and widely published poets but by college undergraduate students feverishly in the process of coming to their own voices. One can learn as much from the trip as from the arrival. Here's "Exhale" by Scott James. As you read it, look for spots where the poem springs alive, where a quirky and original voice is heard. Look for the human in the human words:

I've got volumes of myself
stored back in my silences,
devoured by pyromoments
of misguided release.
I like the warm feeling
when I smile with my whole face,
skin that compresses into my eyes,
but the whole white picket grin
stands before a crude house,
and the distances that cower
are scars on skin.
I like stars behind clouds
that appear for blinks
then fade to aftertaste.
They say truth comes
through drunkenness,
our inhibitions demolished,
but I'm always sorry for something
when the sun returns.
I like clean socks.
They just feel good,
cotton and all, soft
and unaware
of the mouth they carry

or the mind it hides.
I guess I lie on greenish grass
six feet away
from "the other side."
My mouth
a six pack away from honesty.

The poem moves lithely through a series of revelations disguised as friend-to-friend chatter, reader sitting on the grass sharing the moment with the contemplative speaker. The speaker begins to talk about his shyness punctuated by "pyromoments" of things spoken that shouldn't have been said. What follows, though, is a litany of some things the speaker likes in this world he also pointedly distrusts: how his sweet "white picket" fence smile hides a house of crude scars, for instance. Then the speaker, probably drinking a beer and smoking a cigarette (see the title, "Exhale"), swerves toward the apparent subject—how when one is drunk such false fronts always collapse into the rubble of day-after apologies.

That's enough to make an interesting poem, but note how the speaker allows his mind to follow its own path. The wonderful line about liking "clean socks" comes seemingly out of nowhere, and its surprise sweetens the pie. Sure, we've all thought something similar while pulling on our socks in the morning, and thus we laugh and agree but ask, "What does this have to do with lying?" Then the socks become associated with the speaker's mouth and mind, and their apparent purity is besmirched. Can nothing in this world be trusted? Is nothing innocent really what it appears to be? Not even clean socks? The poem's subject matter becomes expansive, far-reaching, and troubling—this, suddenly no simple poem about the intersection of shyness and drunkenness. When the poem concludes with a nod toward the grave, we readers get the notion the speaker believes there's nothing trustworthy in this flawed world save death. Take a breath, dear reader, and "exhale" at the news.

Here's another young poet, one whose work favors modes of performance and spoken word poetry. Note the way it builds on repetition and rhyme in the manner of hip-hop itself, thus shaping a poem more to be performed than to be engaged in silence by readers. It's a poem spoken by a voice that would feel at home in locales such as the Nuyorican Café and other urban

coffeehouse scenes where oral presentation is valorized over the page's textual subtleties. Here's the direct-address flourish to the listener that opens Jené Mitchell's "ode to hip' hop: a poem written while listening to Kanye West, Common Sense, a little Lupé Fiasco, and after discovering that I really like long titles":

You might not want to read this poem,
because I'm not exactly sure if it has a point.
It's more likea hip-hop joint,

with hot lines' rhymes
that curl around your finger
like a perm;
get in yo—men-tal stash
like Smokey did Big Worm.
I've been wondering
if pedantic terms
are the only thing that makes poetic,
maybe I should be more prophetic,
and say something like,
Is poetry the spirit of me
Does
it
fall from my psyche
like a leaf
from a tree
or is it the essence of be
you know some Buuuull *Shit like that*
Maybe then you would think I wasa poet
. . . . . .

From the get-go, one discovers the speaker's voice is *voiced,* sung as much as spoken. That voice is rich with irony, and it's self-aware as well. Here and also in what follows, the speaker shows her debt to popular culture and her knowledge of traditional poetic history. The speaker's voice exudes, as she suggests following, a good deal of "sass":

I—guess there is no difference
between me and the rapper poppin' Moet.
But—then again
maybe there is.
'Cause I don't have a "big boo-tied bitch"
p-poppin' on my left knee,
with the most perfect instrumental screaming
in the background
"Give Us, Us Free."

So maybe Cinqué was right,
I can't let Hip-Hop go down withouta fight
Give a jab like Liston,
and end with Ali's right,
just lecture to the beat that beat boxes through night
because I'm the Great White Hype,
just a little bit ***darker*** */ a little more* ass,
make you fall in love with my voice,
like James Earl Jones with sass.

Note how Mitchell attempts to employ typography to embody her spoken performative voice within the constraints of printed text, all in an effort to *show* how the poem is meant to be *heard.* In addition, the poet has included a metalink to information that exists outside of the text, thereby creating a kind of metapoem alongside the one on the page. The link to info about Cinqué contains material the spoken word poet may variably include, select from, or even ignore altogether during the performance of the poem before a live audience. This adds an element of spontaneity and surprise to each recital of the poem, a performance unlikely to copy itself from event to event. Thereafter, the speaker's deliberations become more reflective and focused:

My verbs are glocks aimed straight at your dome
half-cocked lyrics peak from rhythmic chambers
ready to spew a new danger
Mos Definitely knowledge

will build this power
. . . . . .
No race has pulled itself up by doing what we do
waking up to the coca bean coffee we brew
selling each other—bodies and bags
underbelly so rancid it makes me gag
. . . . . .
We've gotta habit for destruction,
jonesin' for a little pain to get us through the day
. . . . . .
So don't kick me off my soap box yet
I haven't knocked you out
taken my purse
preached like Malik
or J. Ivy'd this free
verse
. . . . .
I haven't said my hottest bars
and stretched like Armstrong to the stars
pulling us away from Mars.

Just waiting for the elastic to give out,
so I can ***rap*** *my arms around* ***music****.*
You might not want-to read *this poem*
I'm not exactly sure if it has a point.
It's more like a hip-hop joint,
a fattie that's been rolled and stuffed
with a swisher head point,
de-seeded to perfection/licked just right
Go head—
Take a hit, **truth** *don't bite.*

The poem's swirl of competing references, meshing Louis Armstrong and superhero Stretch Armstrong, for instance, blends African American and white cultural markers. And though the poem decries the effects of hard drug abuse in African American culture, it simultaneously (and paradoxically) makes of itself—and of hip-hop—a cannabis vehicle of veracity, cel-

ebrating the buzz attendant to admitting the truth about both mode and culture.

Performative not readerly conventions ground such a poem. The effects of its intonations, repetitions, and even its contradictions are designed to play before an audience keen to *hear* and *feel* the poem's experience more than to ruminate upon its textual message. The strengths and drawbacks, as well as the challenges and possibilities, for such a poem inhere in its presentation of voice. How that voice is received by listeners as opposed to readers will determine the poem's success—which is to say, listeners will establish its cultural value.

Unlike the former poem's insistence on spoken word aesthetics and the flow of lyrical language, Stephanie Forrest's "Shatter" depends upon concision and ellipticality. While the poem opens its narrative trench coat in two initial stanzas, an abrupt leap occurs between that and its final movement.

My ex shoots tin cans from fence posts
to center herself. I file police
reports in small college towns.

I spend nights cornered
against my sink until thunder stops.
Silence restores my breath.

How close someone must be
to put a nine millimeter hole
through my second story window.[1]

What's not said by the speaker looms as large as what is spoken. The poem's compression of syntax and line mirrors its compression of emotion and story. What happened to dissolve the speaker's relationship, along with the speaker's connection to filing police reports, is never explained. Readers are left to ponder whether filing police reports is the speaker's job, the unhappy result of her failed relationship gone violent, or merely one aspect of her living among the wildings of a college town. Because the speaker holds her cards close to the vest, her voice exhibits tension and drama. As a result, for readers the ex who shoots "to center herself" becomes perilously bound up with the "someone" who fires a bullet through the speaker's window.

How "close," indeed, both in physical and emotional distance, these (identical?) figures come to appear in the speaker's psyche, she wounded by loss as well as by possibility. Like the other two poems discussed here, Forrest's "Shatter" was written during our work together in a semester's poetry workshop. Forrest's deft evocation of voice impressed more than just her workshop fellows; the editors of the well-regarded national undergraduate literary journal *Susquehanna Review* accepted "Shatter" for publication within their pages.

One could say the poem's radical of presentation differs markedly from that of Jené Mitchell's and Scott James's poems, which is to say the voices that speak these three poems present themselves and their relationship to the world in diverse ways. One might well take Robert Creeley's oft-repeated saw—"Form is never more than an extension of content"—and recast it, "Form is never more than an extension of voice." For what your poem says and how it's said determine the way readers imagine and receive your poetic voice. Your speaker embodies a character on your poem's stage, a figure for whom you inscribe her most intimate verbal gestures. In sound, syntax, diction, and word choice, as well as in what's spoken and what's not, you fashion a voice to be embraced or instead cold-shouldered by your audience.

CHAPTER 12

Why Kids Hate Poetry

Because we teach them to hate it. However alluring, this glibness—like most temptations—hides a nail in its soft shoe. To be sure, our hand in teaching kids to abhor poetry is a matter more complicated than that. The issue is not so much that we do it but how and why we do so. In our ardor to compel students to love poetry—itself a noble mission—we instead inflict upon them art that tastes of castor oil and smacks of spankings. Medicine may sustain the child's health, and punishment may indeed stop her from playing in traffic, but pain is an ineffective inducement for fueling her appreciation of art.

Like all the arts, poetry proffers a mode of celebrating those things we value within a larger world that may esteem them little or not at all. By privileging imagination and intuition, poetry promises an alternative to the sort of experiential prison where lives are subject to the quantification of gradebook ledgers and the straitjacket of the principal's red-faced rants. It favors a life of revision, rethinking, and rebellion. Poetry offers a medium in which to say what one dare not utter in conversation, in an essay, in the electrically charged realm of the confessional, or perhaps even on one's MySpace page (the twenty-first-century version of the confessional). As William Carlos Williams suggests, poetry amounts to the sphere where one unwraps one's "punishable secrets" without fear of recrimination or judgment. There's a reason why Plato in the *Republic* worried about admitting poets into his perfect society: Poets accost culture's rules, fuel readers' volatile emotions, and generally wreak havoc among the staid populace of respectable society. Poets, in fact, often don't operate *within* conventional society as much as on

its fringes, sniping away at the center's follies, prejudices, and foibles. In this way, poetry offers refuge from The Man in all his fascist disguises.

All this would seem to make one's youth the ideal occasion to explore and to appreciate poetry. Timing is crucial here. In short, one must catch kids before they learn to hate poetry. For most, the disease of poetry-loathing, for which there are few dependable cures, onsets in ninth grade, roughly at age fourteen. After that, most students find themselves helpless against high school's various disaffections, one of which is assiduously to avoid being seen as sensitive and poetically vulnerable before their peers. With great fanfare in 2008, the Academy of American Poets released results of a study indicating the vast majority of poetry lovers came to the art *before the age of eighteen.* One is tempted to respond to the well-intentioned academy's conclusion by letting out Homer Simpson's trademark, "Doh!" Anyone who has worked with young people understands that eighteen is years too late to sample poetry's ambrosia. It's generous to say two out of ten college freshmen become poetry converts, so much crucial poetry proselytizing is done not by high-falutin', university-ensconced poet-professors but by middle school teachers at work among our hormonally wracked youth. It is up to them, and to us in academe, let me repeat with emphasis, to catch kids before they learn to detest poetry.

For the most part, that's not being done. The bulk of students who succumb to poetry-loathing do so before they're fifteen. Several causes contribute to this unsettling reality. In the classroom, poetry—this innately wild, frequently uncivil, and fundamentally rebellious art—has been neutered. To tame it, classroom poetry, like one's lovable but unruly pet, has been "fixed." Many teachers offer their students only poetry-as-eunuch: mannerly, genteel, safe to leave at home alone with spouse and kids. Poetry's life-creating and life-sustaining vitality has been excised, with resultant pain for verse and for students forced to endure long classroom hours studying its enfeebled blathering. I'm not referring reductively to taking out the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll but to a larger bowdlerizing of anything that elicits *tsk-tsk* from the dear gray ladies, whether they be male or female. Put another way, poets and poetry in the schools have been, as Jay Parini suggests, "domesticated."[1] Teachers have left the poetry-wolves in the woods, preferring instead a petting zoo of poetry-poodles, cuddly and well-behaved.

Here's an equally thorny problem: Many middle and high school instructors simply don't hazard teaching poetry. As students, they learned to hate

it. Now, as instructors, they have learned, as a mode of defense, to ignore it. Rather than nakedly chance their own supposed intellectual limits or risk their emotional lives in front of students, they behave as if poetry's dead art is unworthy of the contemporary classroom. They assume their students are too jaded or too ironic to invest in poetry, unable to fathom its possibilities. Worse yet, if they do teach poetry, many teach it awkwardly, with a debilitating pedagogical limp. Let me be clear here: few instructors are soulless enough to choose purposefully to do a poor job of teaching verse. Still, as students themselves, many teachers experienced poetry instruction rooted in forms of penance and interrogation. They merely endured what they rightly ought to have enjoyed. Many who teach poetry thus do so now as if arcane varieties of schoolmarmish pain were its only pleasures.

Though assigning blame here is akin to solving the riddle of the chicken and the egg—did bad teachers or bad teaching come first?—the results for our moment are undeniable. In short, many of our current teachers of verse were once mistaught poetry and now do the same to their students, our future poetry instructors. Many among both groups have come to fear or to distrust it. As a result, teachers often present their students only a constipated poetry exuding Eddie Haskell manners and valorizing high moral fiber. Doing so, they inflict an aesthetic and pedagogical double whammy sure to bore if not also to traumatize both students and teachers alike. For their students, poetry's rules loom as rigid as prison bars, its hidden meanings as lethal as undercover cops. No self-respecting kid gladly consigns his wrists to The Man's handcuffs.

Sound as Sense: Poetry Out Loud

That our schools have fallen for poetry that worships mere didactic mewling is a wonder in itself. Consider the terms by which those teachers—and indeed most students and their parents—first came to poetry. Most likely poetry arrived as sound and pleasure, as rhythm, music, and beat. The vehicle was a nursery rhyme whose chiming words and tub-thumping meter created an aural and oral enchantment. No child pondered the deeper meaning of the self-sufficient whimsy of this: "Jack Sprat could eat no fat, / his wife could eat no lean. / And so between them both, you see, / they licked the platter clean." Not even the most vigilant 1950s moralist was apt to follow up that jaunty tune by admonishing the child to eat everything on her

plate, for there were people starving in China. The bodily delight to be had by hearing those lines and later to be felt by memorizing and saying them oneself made of language a toy as much as a tool. Language was pleasure and play, a source of enjoyment as tangible as ice cream or one's bare feet surfing freshly polished hardwood floors.

Though no child needs to be told, Edward Sapir duly reminds us adults, "Poetry everywhere is inseparable in its origins from the singing voice and the measure of the dance." My own children nearly wrestled me to the floor, pleading for each night's rendition of Mother Goose. Although they knew ahead of time what fate would befall those three blind mice, they experienced each recitation afresh, as if the inevitability of the narrative paled in comparison to the words' musical flourish. While familiarity may tend to make a story tiresome, the predictable chime and echo of musical language instead induce greater satisfaction with each hearing or saying. Poetry shares the allure of song lyrics, where singing along is as pleasurable as singing alone.

We learn as much of poetry by hearing as we do by reading. And we learn it by engaging the auditory imagination, a way of knowing both mysterious and redemptive. Some teachers understand this notion better than others. Theodore Roethke, for instance, built a reputation for the unique design of his poetry and writing classes at the University of Washington. His students have spoken reverentially of class sessions consisting solely of Roethke's reading poetry aloud. No New Critical explication, no exhaustive citation of sources, no historical perspective—modes well within Roethke's reach as poet and teacher. Instead, he simply read aloud, playing his sonorous voice like the reed instrument it was, reading and rereading poems he loved for their blend of musical and emotional appeal. Roethke understood poems are as much sonic as ideational expressions. Poems are built of sound as words themselves are assembled of phonemes. But where words' system of signs is arbitrary—randomly assigning meaning to "dog," "cat," or "happiness"—sounds carry associations both primal and universal. The resonance of mournful cry or joyful exultation transcends dialect and language. In hearing a poem, listeners decode these sonic signs below the threshold of conscious awareness. This mode of reception enriches the ideational and verbal play listeners consciously attend to. The result is a richly verbal and sonic experience that accounts for the heightened ways listeners engage oral poetry as opposed to prose. It would seem Roethke's method was not

unproductive. Poets James Wright, Carolyn Kizer, Richard Hugo, and a slew of notable others passed through Roethke's classroom and onto the pages of poetry volumes.

Enabling students to recognize a poem's ability to alter their consciousness of themselves and of their world is more than half the struggle in most classrooms. Most folks who love poems have experienced something akin to the blissful rush Emily Dickinson describes this way: "If I read . . . [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 ways I know. Is there another way?" How does any teacher do the same for a classroom of bleary-eyed students? Instructively, comments by high school participants in the NEA-sponsored 2007 Poetry Out Loud national competition illustrate a similarly epiphanic encounter with poetry, all of it engendered by the act of reading poetry and reading it out loud. Here's Alanna Rivera describing her coming upon Ai's "Conversation": "I love that poem because when I read it for the first time, it was listening to my voice for the first time. Even before I knew what it all meant, I felt something; I saw mist and curiosity rising from the page; we began breathing the same air, and we were one." Though the Poetry Out Loud competition is not without its flaws, it does offer this signal expression of poetry's powers to elevate as well as to deepen one's sense of being human.

The notion behind the competition remains admirable. It entices teenagers into poetry's hip pocket by emphasizing verse's sonic qualities, the very attributes these adolescents value in whatever forms of popular music grace their omnipresent iPods. If one ever needed confirmation that poetry's aural pleasures precede (and perhaps surmount) ideational understanding, then Rivera's remarks offer solid evidence. "*Even before I knew what it all meant,*" she says, invoking poetry's auditory appeal and its ability to intoxicate with sound alone.[2]

One may reasonably worry that Poetry Out Loud competitors privilege forensic performance to the detriment of poetry's artistic nuances, thereby raising theatrics above poetics.[3] And one may adduce as evidence that 2007 Poetry Out Loud national champion Amanda Fernandez went on to pursue a New York University degree in *acting*. My own experience as judge of the 2009 Poetry Out Loud Illinois state finals introduced me to the perils of poetry recitation along the histrionic lines of *Saturday Night Live*'s "Master Thespian" played by Jon Lovitz. Of the sixteen state finalists, roughly a third

exhibited fondness for the double-clenched breast, wink and eye roll, bent-knee plea, and open-armed-Jesus gestures. Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman," best imagined as spoken by a mature, middle-aged woman who has lived a little for good and ill, becomes a dangerous weapon in the hands (and body) of a high school girl. She'll risk a pulled muscle to embody the poem's sultry references to the span of her waist, the curve of her arm, the sway of her hips, and so on. Fortunately, Poetry Out Loud judging guidelines admonish participants to avoid such excess and encourage judges to lower the scores of those who play Master Thespian to the poem's detriment.

The majority of participants took seriously the contest's performance guidelines that emphasize articulation and voice, eye contact, subtle physical gesturing, and evident understanding of the poem. Most of them, I believe, genuinely *got* the poems they recited and relished conveying that experience of shared understanding. What's more, their poem choices ranged admirably from Paul Engle's "The Hero" to Marianne Moore's "Poetry" to Langston Hughes's "Theme for English B." The crowd of 150 or more included fellow students school-bussed in to witness the event, a throng of proud teachers, and local folks interested in the arts—all of whom were quick to cheer contestants in the blustery manner one expects at high school basketball or football games. To hear the recitation of a poem applauded with the fervor given a game-winning touchdown was both stunning and a bit unsettling. Honestly, I worried that the performer was being cheered exclusive of the poem he/she had brought to life.

Eventually, the final round stilled those worries, as each contestant's recitation proved to be riveting, none more so than that of eventual winner, Kareem Sayegh. Offering a nuanced recitation of Elizabeth Bishop's lengthy "Man-moth," a poem rife with tonal shifts and evocative images, Sayegh mesmerized both audience and judges. As an immigrant, Sayegh literally inhabited the poem's sense of otherness and possibility, its whimsy and peril—giving a fresh American interpretation that enriched the poem for me in ways I'd not imagined before. Later, at the 2009 national Poetry Out Loud competition, Kareem again recited "Man-moth." His performance there must have been as enthralling as it was in Illinois, for Kareem took home third-place national honors.

Middle and high school teachers should take note. Many teachers face classrooms of poetry disbelievers who must be cajoled into appreciating the art. Keep in mind that even 2008 Poetry Out Loud winner Shawntay A. Henry

believed poetry was "boring"—until she began to perform it orally and thus became enamored of its sonic intoxications: "I thought poetry was boring, but when you really listen to the words, and recite it on stage, it comes alive. . . . I hope this is an opportunity for me to open doors for younger children . . . to let them know that poetry is not what it seems." Ms. Henry expresses what many young people must feel encountering the handcuffed poems of many classrooms.[4] Teachers ought first to employ poetry's sonic allures as means to capture students' ears and eyes and heads. Their prime objective should be to unbrick the wall that separates the hieratic from the demotic as well as allegedly highbrow from those ostensibly lowbrow expressions of art most teenagers venerate. Whether it is through hip-hop, rap, grunge, metal, emo, or one of the mitotic varieties of rock spread fast as virus among them, teenagers understand oral expression as a mode of *obsession.* The trick, then, is to persuade youths that their own yearnings given voice in popular music share much with poetry's obsessive orality and performativity.

Meaning's Pin the Tail on the Donkey

Why, then, do many middle and high school poetry classrooms persist in harping on meaning to the exclusion of the musical line? Billy Collins's well-known "Introduction to Poetry" describes an unsettling but all too common scene in high school (and college) poetry classrooms:

[To view this text, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Though one might reasonable assume "they" in these lines refers to teachers, it conceivably applies to students as well. Both teacher and student have been trained by the educational discourse community, and they learn to approach poems as enemies to be interrogated. Both will do so by whatever means necessary to flush out information and thus swing the next test's battle to their side. Both will water-board a poem to elicit *the* meaning encoded beneath the flesh of its lines. Without guilty conscience, both will kill the

poem to save themselves and others, if only to rescue everyone from indeterminacy. That's because both have been that *student* tied to the classroom's chair and asked to reveal what a poem "really means." Both have felt The Man's iron glove tighten around their necks as they failed.

Many instructors make the act of reading a poem for its "meaning" into a solemn game of pin the tail on the donkey. Blindfolded students are at the mercy of their teacher, the only one with "vision" to judge the results. One wonders who is being pinned, with what, and to what (tail) end? Oftentimes, students feel like donkeys, no, like *jackasses* pinning the tail on themselves. Students suffer the not inconsequential prick of being stupid, naive, or simply wrong—no small thing to be humiliated in front of their unforgiving peers. These students' wounds exhibit a surprising pertinacity. For instance, one student visibly flinched during our classroom discussion of Frost's ponderous Petrarchan sonnet "Design." A trenchant questioning of divine order and intention, the poem opens with the speaker's attention on what appears to be a simple natural scene:

[To view this text, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Strikingly, the speaker then swerves to question spiritual and universal order and punctures the envelope of traditional American transcendental solace in nature. It was Emerson, after all, who declared "natural facts" to be signs of "spiritual facts." Here, the speaker discovers not succor in natural order but rather an unsettling inkling of malignant design:

[To view this text, refer to
the print version of this title.]

What Craig did not share with the class he revealed to me in his daily journal response. His response said nothing about the poem's musical formal control, about Frost as a blend of Modern and nineteenth-century

poet, about careful word choice or even about his distaste for the old master. Instead, his journal recounted in stark detail an incident from his high school English class, a snow-chilled and purple-skied morning when his teacher asked him to explicate the deeper meaning behind the poem's natural symbols. He'd only begun to suggest something tentative about the ironic confluence of white spider, moth, and flower when his teacher interrupted him midsentence. "Son," she said, "this is a poem about one's first sexual encounter, about purity besmirched . . ." Blah blah blah, her words bent him into a hormonal pretzel. Notwithstanding the teacher's emotional tsunami and her (apparently) personal reading of the poem, what stuck with Craig was the lesson that poems had singular meanings that excluded—and devalued—all alternative interpretations. And only The Man, this time figured in his pants-suited Junior English instructor, tends the gate of that arcane knowledge and admits the truly worthy. Equally troubling, only The Man is privileged to judge what response—and by extension what person—is wholly worthless. Little surprise few raise their hands to knock upon meaning's gilded electric gate, given the shock at risk.

Craig's teacher, like others before and since, had denied one of poetry's most appealing aspects: poems offer a multifarious experience that lifts readers beyond *Dragnet*'s interrogative insistence on "just the facts, ma'am," the poetry cop's fixation on who-done-what-to-whom-and-why. Let me employ a baseball analogy to illustrate this point. Poems make available an array of meanings to those who enter poetry's ballpark. Yes, the view from the first-base line is different from that offered by the right-field bleachers, but both can see, say, the ball driven to deep right field and gloved cleanly on one hop off the wall by the right fielder. Along first base, a former second baseman in the crowd may pay more attention to whether the runner on first rounds the bag and heads for third, noting where the second baseman lines up to cut off the outfielder's throw. Maybe he'll holler derisively when the outfielder overthrows the cutoff man playing his former position and the runner thus advances easily to third. Above the right-field wall, another fan may be impressed with the fielder's strong if inaccurate arm or by his deft gloving of a ball slicing to the coffin corner. Perhaps still another, a former slap-hitter, is amazed the right-handed hitter even got his bat on the nasty outside pitch to advance the runner successfully. On the bench, the manager may well decide the pitcher's effort shows he's tiring and thus call the bullpen for a reliever to begin warming up.

All these various readings of this one event have validity. They reflect the individual's knowledge and attention, a blend of experience and focus brought to bear, in this case, to encounter the poem/ballgame. While there are some things one cannot rightly deny about this—that the ball was hit off the right-field wall, for instance—what one makes of that and what pleasure one gains from it vary greatly among different readers. With practice and exposure, one's readings grow more sophisticated, surely, but that reality does not insist on the poem-as-event's monolithic meaning and value.

Chilling with the Fireside Poets in the Google Age

This deadly serious *Where's Waldo?* search for meaning makes poetry a pursuit similar to hunting that book's strangely dressed main character amid a crowd of competing faces. Once meaning's Waldo is fingered on the page, who ever returns to enjoy the quest again? Once meaning's identified—*the* singular meaning provided by the teacher—all pleasure empties from the poem. What's more, even the search itself holds little intrinsic interest for students accustomed to having everything at their fingertips via the magic of Google. My teenage son describes some of his peers' thinking on the matter, suggesting many students wonder why they should labor to figure things out and ponder an elusive answer when they can simply Ask Jeeves.

Poetry both demands and rewards a measure of patience most current youths have never been exposed to, let alone practiced. Everything about our culture has conspired to immediacy, delivering the world's mysteries upon an instantaneous digital platter as fat as the computer screen is wide. Don't be misled. Patience is a thing valuable to learn and to exercise, and for readers it is often the source of rich aesthetic pleasure. But patience, outside of the dispositionally blessed, is an acquired trait. Students must be taught the profits to be had by reading attentively, and to do so, they must first invest in the venture.

One sure way for teachers to encourage such investment is to offer students poems part and parcel of their own era, poems bristling with the diction and particulars of their own familiar world given body in verse. How thrilled students are to encounter poems composed of the stuff of their moment—television, movies, the neighborhood mall, the corner Shell station, the tunes they jingle on their phones and scroll to on their omnipresent iPods. Once they encounter art fleshed with the moment, they are much

more likely to advance the attention and patience necessary to enliven a text and thus give art life in their own lives.

Ah, there's the rub. Most teachers rely on someone else's definition of the classics to entice students into appreciating poetry. Students, faced with a poem wearing waistcoat and spats, feel both locked out and out of place, much like kids schussed from the room when the parents start the adult talk they're not privy to. Yes, the classics ought to be taught, if only to extend the culture's historical perspective. But to appreciate the *classics,* whatever they are, given the term's problematic canonical notion, students must acquire aesthetic sophistication. That sophistication must be ably taught and willingly learned over time, as one would a piano concerto or a basketball three-point shot. This is not to say that contemporary poems amount to "Chopsticks" renditions or breakaway layups. The point is rather that students encountering a work bound up in their own historical moment are more willing to exert the intellectual and emotional energy necessary to inhabit fully a poem's experience.

Teachers' tendency to offer up the Fireside Poets reflects their own preoccupation with didactic meaning. Like many, teachers blanch at indeterminacy and at endings that don't end. How does one put that on the test? As a result, a good number of teachers prefer poems to click open like a box so their contents may be categorized and accounted for, item by stolid item, as if poems were material not linguistic and experiential things. To do so is to thwart poetry's innate lyricism and orality, its roots in music. To do so, perhaps unwittingly, is to promote poetry as means of moral betterment. To do so also invokes the Great Age of Newspaper Verse, where the genteel poem's primary purpose could be reduced to the white-bearded phrase *prodessare et delectare,* "to teach and to delight." This matter is especially problematic for teenagers, most of whom run in fear of sermonizing, whether it issues from the pulpit, the home, or the schoolroom. None wishes to become complicit in the status quo, especially one liberally spritzed with thee's and thou's and snappy aphoristic advice. Teenagers are least apt to warm to Longfellow's fireside verse, no matter Longfellow's birthday was once a schoolkid's national holiday.

In my experience visiting middle and high school classrooms all over Illinois, something catastrophic happens to kids between seventh and ninth grades. The event stands tragic for the kids and ominous for those of us who believe poetry offers a lifetime of humanizing pleasures. Some demon of irre-

sistible if irritable charms, some fiend possessing intractable powers, burrows his way inside our kids' heads and hearts and spirits. This devil with candy in his pocket convinces them poetry is suddenly too vapid, too sissy foo-foo, too follow-the-rules-or-die, too gray about the fat man's temples, too scented of blue-haired ladies' lilac sachet, too bereft of life-giving sass and funk, too pinky-pointing polite, too Sunday-pulpit, too ruler-across-my-knuckles-please-shoot-me-and-end-this-nightmare. The plague is more fatal to boys than to girls. In seventh grade, even guys in gym shoes and jerseys come to hear my poems. They shake my hand and laugh in the right places. They admit they've written some themselves, "Wanna hear one?" They say they like mine about *South Park*. By ninth grade, it's down to the one black-jeaned and disaffected, the skinny guy cut off from the herd, circled by frothed hyenas his parents and teachers simply can't see. Too often the poetry we teach and the way we teach it summon The Man's poetry anti-Christ.

Two worthy solutions are to put forward poems kids can relate to and to supplement text with audio as well as video poetry so students can see and hear poets perform, aspects of Web sites I've created as Illinois poet laureate to serve students and teachers: http://www.poetlaureate.il.gov and http://www.bradley.edu/poet. A bevy of other Web sites, poetry CDs and DVDs, and contemporary anthologies gather poems suitable for use in middle and high school classrooms, where, admittedly, graphic sexuality and undue profanity will earn both parents' and the school board's censure. Teachers can pick and choose from a range of modes and styles in anthologies as various as the experimental *The North Anthology of Postmodern Verse* and as accessible as *Poetry 180* (and its follow-up *180 More*).[6] Here are two poems among hundreds I might have chosen to illustrate my assertion that poems can appeal to diffident teenagers. The first is Tony Hoagland's "Dickhead," a piece recounting a teenage boy's vulnerability and the defense found in slinging around the pack's edgy lingo. Here's the opening flourish:

To whomever taught me the word dickhead,
I owe a debt of thanks.
It gave me a way of being in the world of men
when I most needed one,

when I was pale and scrawny,
naked, goosefleshed

as a plucked chicken
in a supermarket cooler, a poor

forked thing stranded in the savage
universe of puberty. . . .[7]

Later, the speaker gives readers a sense of how utile the word became for him, a way to at once blend in and shield himself against a surge of testosterone-induced mania:

But dickhead was a word as dumb
and democratic as a hammer, an object
you could pick up in your hand,
and swing,

saying dickhead this and dickhead that,
a song that meant the world
was yours enough at least
to bang on like a garbage can
. . . . . .

protected me and calmed me like a psalm.

By the close of the poem, the word "dickhead," vulgar as it is, offers the civility and comradeship for which the speaker had been yearning:

Hardly knowing what I did,
or what would come of it,
I made a word my friend.

Unlikely to seek out poetry on their own accord, teenage boys could hardly fail to see the humor in the poem, no doubt guffawing at the repeated use of a word that borders on the verboten. Through all that laughing, however, they'd also secretly see their own adolescent predicament, surprised perhaps to see their reality given voice in a poem. Depending on the group's sophistication, the teacher could address Wittgensteinian coding/decoding

as well as language games, the vocabulary of class and gender, and the ways words both define and convey the self. But one need not delve into esoteric matters to prove the poem's worth and relation to teenagers' lives. Surely part of the poem's appeal is its transgressiveness, its willingness to speak of what is often kept silent and to speak of it in language of the rabble. This transgressive quality also contributes to the following piece by Tupac Shakur, the slain rapper now lionized in death as much as life. Here's his verse premonition of untimely death:

[To view this text, refer to the print version of this title.]

Widely believed to be a casualty of East versus West Coast hip-hop wars, Tupac offers perspective on human values and life's brevity. His still-unsolved murder accentuates the tension of his premonition that he "will die Before" his time. Moreover, his contravention of standard English by employing numerals in place of "to" and "for" is cast against his seventeenth-century affectation of capitalizing key nouns, simultaneously breaking and upholding tradition. What's more, the transgressive nature of hip-hop culture is balanced against his desire to have lived "For a Principle," an element sure to catch the attention of even the most outlaw-loving teenage boys. Surely a lively discussion would ensue regarding the nature and definition of being "Positive" and living for a "Principle" in Tupac's hip-hop realm—and the slipperiness of those terms in larger contemporary society as well. With that, the teacher has sweetly hoodwinked students into eating their vegetables with a little butter and pepper, persuading them in the process green beans can be tasty.

Cuisinarting the Study and Practice of Poetry

With notable success, grade, middle, and high school—as well as some university—poetry instructors have begun to blend the *study* and the *practice* of poetry within a unified instructional field. This "Cuisinarting" of courses once thought to be as separate as the dinner's salad and dessert has made for better-fed and more adventuresome students. First, students hear, read, and recite poems of their own era as well as engage historical poetic forms and modes. If they discuss content and meaning, those matters reside always in context of poetry's syntactic, formal, and sonic pleasures. Thus informed and enticed, students then try their own hands at writing a poem or two inspired by the examples they've read, recited, and talked about. Sometimes instructors provide students with prompts to initiate their writing, other times not. Perhaps no student will emerge as the next Walt Whitman, but the majority will come to appreciate poetry's possibilities and rigors more immediately and more lastingly than mere textual reading can induce.

This kind of instruction offers students hands-on and minds-on experience with art. It is neither passive nor explicative. Instead, it is decidedly active and creative. Pointedly, this instruction surmounts that of corollary courses in music and art appreciation because here students actively create their own expressions of the art they have engaged. For some students, these poems may turn out to be the only ones they write during their lifetimes. For others, the opportunity to write poems may encourage them to do so casually throughout their lifetimes. If they are regarded by some as poetry dilettantes, then bully for them, for their humanity is deepened by their awareness of poetry's unique pleasures. For a still smaller group, this experience may catalyze an interest in verse and fuel their serious study of the art form. No matter the result, these students encounter art in meaningful fashion, thereby enriching their appreciation and understanding of their world and its aesthetic pleasures.

If we who read, write, and teach poetry also love it enough to care about its future, then we must devise ways for poetry to adapt to the digital tide threatening to sweep it out to sea. We must assure that future poetry teachers, many of whom are now our current students, appreciate the stiff challenge and real reward that stand before them. Poetry can be antidote to the fumings of The Man and the slackness of our own inattentiveness—both soul-

less enemies of pleasure. Those who teach poetry to young folks from grade school to the university level share an obligation to reveal the poem as sonic delight, art framed both in history and in their students' peculiar moment of time, and a mode generously welcome to various interpretations. The young aren't likely to hate what they see wearing their own faces, breathing their own breath, and speaking the once unspeakable lines of their lives.

CHAPTER 13

Whitman's Sampler

An Assortment of Youth Poems

The holiday arrival of Whitman's Sampler chocolates delivered one exotic pleasure of my Midwestern youth. Decidedly middlebrow, inexpensive if not cheap, a proverbial working-class splurge, the box wafted above the living room's coffee table as if riding a cloud of its own chocolate potpourri. One never knew what one would get—euphoria from choosing a dark chocolate center or retching despair from plucking something jelly-centered, an orange hue not found in nature. By family edict whatever one picked one had to finish. Waste was no welcome guest in scrimping-by's house. My younger sister, sly as only the youngest becomes from witnessing her elder siblings' misjudgments, developed a covert strategy for discerning what lay underneath without first risking a bite. Skulking alone to her room with our pale-yellow-boxed heaven, she'd prick the candy's bottom with her long thumbnail, penetrating just deep enough to detect an unnatural pink hue or the sticky jelly's gloss. If that's what she chanced upon—and not dark chocolate or almond fudge—she'd deftly plop the candy back within its paper wrapper and continue her quest until rewarded with not-so-hidden treasure. After a week or so, all the good ones were gone. What remained, hard cat's hearts staled by my sister's thumbnail prick, even my father couldn't stomach. The Sampler rode the coffee table unmolested until Easter, when a fresh box met the fate my sister plied with subtle but earnest abandon.

In honor of those chocolates and in the spirit of Walt Whitman, America's poet of man as well as woman, of child as well as adult, of rich and poor, of the learned and the ditch digger, *our* poet, let me offer up some surprising delights. These I've gathered, à la my sister, from my Whitman's Sampler of

youth poems. These I savored for myself; these I now offer up so you may do the same. Lest my previous discussion of why kids hate poetry leave us despairing, let me bestow upon youth poetry its rare moment on stage. True enough, poetry can be well taught by teachers both skillful and inventive. Likewise, students can write poems that rearrange the familiar furniture of their lives' living rooms and of ours. Though most adults never read a word kids write, doing so ought to convince us the kids aren't headed to hell in YouTube's digital handbasket. In fact, Robert Graves's notion that poetry is a form of "stored magic" finds ample support in the acts of conjuring evident in these kids' poems. To be sure, these poems aren't perfect, if one is foolish enough to believe any poem to be perfectible. So, readers, keep your red pens pocketed. Instead, relish how each shows poetry's singular knack for expressing and celebrating our peculiar human pageant.

What follows is an assortment of youth poems featured on my Web sites. These poems embody several notable verse functions favored by poets over centuries: modes that celebrate, lament, give voice to the voiceless, and define one's self- and group identity. These poems thus connect their young authors to literary history of which they've probably little conscious awareness, the young seemingly intuitively grasping poetry's intrinsic ability to express the human condition. Let's start with "Bread," a group poem illustrating the most basic of poetry's functions—joyful celebration. This piece, cowritten by three fifth-graders—Cole Anderson, Grant Dutton, and Eric Rosenwinkel—entices readers with its giddy playfulness.

Bread, bread, bread.
White bread, wheat bread,
stale, soggy, moldy bread,
soft, warm, cold, bread.
Those are just a few,
raisin bread, crazy bread
blueberry bread, too.
Thin bread thick.
Don't forget corn bread.
Best of all I like French toast.[1]

Each time I recite the boys' poem before an audience, it elicits roaring belly laughs, a surprisingly uncontainable gush of hilarity made all the

more enjoyable because its very uncontainability so surprises the audience. Listeners and readers love how the final line's exuberant revelation simultaneously sustains and undercuts the poem's ostensibly meticulous list. Instead of another invocation of "bread," we get "toast," a verbal bolt out of the blue. The poem's timing, as with all things comedic, is impeccable.

Still, that stunning final flourish is nicely prefigured by several deft moves, each pulled off by three then-fifth-graders. Note how the poem charms readers whether they consider its voice to be choric or solo. If the poem's voice is seen as choric, readers imagine the three boys spilling out their preferences in a sort of communal gustatory free-for-all. Each boy's taste compliments but also defines the others' preferences. What each says and how he says it alters with each boy's judgment. Each phrase, whether compressing syntax or making use of rhyme, embodies a boy's individual personality elbowing its way to the front of the line amid his schoolboy peers. Even the boys' syntactic play in casting the line "Thin bread thick" breaks rules their teachers taught them about proper sentence structure. One boy's direct address cautioning "don't forget corn bread" can then be seen as spoken as much to the others as to the self or the reader.

If, on the other hand, the poem is imagined as a solo speaker's recitation of his favorites, the crazy syntactical give and take appears equally if differently energized. This time it's heard emerging from the mouth of one boy not only dutifully cataloging his preferences but also barely containing the excitement of listing his darlings. All that syntactic variety and play express the process of the boy's coming to know the self, even if the agent and the topic of such knowledge is as mundane as bread. So the list's intent is to be exhaustive and to be celebratory, directed as much to the self as to the reader/listener. The line about not forgetting corn bread thus becomes both his direct address to the reader and his Post-It note addressed to himself. In the end, the poem's final invocation of "French toast" nicely undermines the speaker's mechanical list-making and enables the speaker's personal taste—in both bread *and* syntax—to burst forth in comedic eruption. We readers receive it, with guffaw and glee, as the solo speaker's consequential if frivolous revelation to himself.

However readers envision the poem's speaker(s), by the time we reach "Don't forget cornbread," we are implicated in the poem's list-making. We've no doubt begun to compose a parallel list of our own, an act of personal discrimination owning peculiar communal properties. When the boys thus

swerve into direct address, they playfully tie their poem to poetry's ancient lineage, linking fifth-graders' joyful flippancy to traditional poetic rhetoric. The line between poet and audience mutes in the process. Above all else, the sense that the authors had great fun writing the poem pervades the entire piece, and their personal delight becomes the readers' as well. Simply read the poem aloud and savor its crazy music, the plodding, exaggerated thump of "bread" against the sudden cymbal splash of "toast"!

"Things I Hate," a poem also curiously invoking soggy bread, demonstrates another of poetry's fundamental purposes: to speak not just of joy but also of lament. Amid a humorous series of items the youthful poet doesn't care for, the poem's bad manners become its redemption. It dares to undercut poetry's prissy reputation for extolling only what one "loves." And this piece by Chicagoan fourth-grader Marisa Rosario shows how in poetry humor and seriousness often hold hands. Note how its tongue-in-cheek list of hated things abruptly closes with a swift gut punch to the unwary reader, a gesture both socially specific and universally evocative:

[To view this text, refer to
the print version of this title.]

As our earlier chapter's discussion of voice suggested, most young poets fumble for a manner to speak their poems in ways that sound peculiarly their own. But this poet's sassy voice bristles with personality figured in precise detail. The young poet seems instinctively to understand poems are as much ways of *seeing* things as they are ways of *saying* things, as Karl Shapiro has noted. With each brush stroke, the young female speaker paints a portrait of her life's concerns—soggy vegetables, homework, and dance class. And

she does so while paying considerable attention to frisky rhymes like math/scratch, sport/warts. She has a bundle of opinions, too, and she's not shy about sharing them with the reader. In fact, for a Chicagoan to dis basketball in the city to which Michael Jordan delivered multiple NBA championships is itself an act of personal defiance. Still, it's the speaker's final allusion to her city's torn social fabric that turns her childlike complaint into larger social commentary. Even her use of the singular "mom"—a choice at odds with grammatical agreement—emphasizes the singularity of each gangbanger's decision to reject the home front for the street. Finally, it's worth noting the final line's the only one not to rhyme, adding even more punch to her complaint. This speaker deftly uses music as well as dissonance. What the speaker hates, unrhymed in the end, adds compelling conflict to her earlier playful litany, lifting her personal complaint to heartrending cultural implication.

Yet another of poetry's principal functions is to serve as mouthpiece for the silenced, a way to give voice to the voiceless. This notion gains a keenness all the more moving within this poem by a young girl who understands how self-imposed silence can be the agent of defense against a world seemingly out to get her, a way to keep part of herself inviolable and unsullied. As a sixth-grader at Gwendolyn Brooks Middle School in Oak Park, Illinois, Ryan Vince wrote "She Sits by the Window," portrait of a girl whose feelings of isolation the poet must well understand:

She sits by the window
wondering what day it is
what time it is, looking
out the window lost like
a snowflake wondering which place
to land. She rocks in
her rocking chair lonely, the only
sound is the angry wind
pounding against the fragile window,
fiddling with her fingers, sitting
by the window, looking at
the lonely street, longing
for a friend. It is a ghost town,
white snow and dark

out, and she sits
by the window.[3]

What's striking is the poet's deft use of enjambment to verbally and physically express her isolation as well as her desire to join with others. Repeatedly, she shows an awareness of how enjambing a line creates equally a sense of separateness and of union, one playing against the other as syntax plays against meaning. And she shows a seemingly innate sense of music, making much from the assonance within the lethal chiming of "lonely," "only," "snow," and "window." The speaker figures herself in the lone snowflake searching for an hospitable spot to call home and the rocking chair holding solitary vigil beside the window, empty with or without her. Even the window expresses victimhood, the "angry wind" pounding so violently the reader winces to ponder how the same fate may have befallen the speaker. Paul Célan once called a poem "a message in a bottle, sent out in the—not always so greatly hopeful—belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps." Consider, then, this poem the speaker's message to a world that seems to have turned its back on her, the voice she cannot bring herself to voice in public.

Our final poem conveys poetry's elemental ability to interrogate the intricacies of individual and group identity. Given our nation's founding in the immigrant experience and our current multicultural milieu, this mode has proven to be particularly keen within recent American poetry. Here, Jessica Johal's "Punjabi American" examines how immigrant families labor to span their collective loneliness, the sense of being simultaneously a part of something and apart from it. As with most poetry, such awareness issues primarily from attention, the poet's careful looking at ways the habitual looms exotic. As Malebranche reminds us, "Attentiveness is the natural prayer of the soul." Living between two worlds neither wholly her own, this Chicagoan high school senior turns her attention to her parents, discovering in the midst of their homey routines a way to reconfigure both them and herself.

I walk through the front door,
the scent of Mati's
tandoori chicken curry
sticks to the air.

In the kitchen
she stands before the stove
adding masala spices
in a beige and white salwar kameez,
the baggy pants I know,
tied with white string, but covered
by the short-sleeved kurta
that reaches just above her knees.

Papa sits at the kitchen table
reading the Punjab Times newspaper.
Bill Clinton is in India,
he flips the page, Aishwariya Rai
starred in the new movie,
Pride and Prejudice.

For just a split second,
the steel kara on his wrist
reflects the sun shining
through the window behind him
and causes a glare in my eyes.

Naniji sits beside him
sipping a cup of strong Punjabi cha
the familiar tea spices
mix with the masala,
and make my tongue go dry. I sit at the table,

Mati places in front of me
a bowl of tandoori curry,
steam from the chicken hits my face,
her lips brief to my forehead,
she says, "Morning, Beta,
careful, it's hot."[4]

The speaker's ancestry washes over her waves of recognition she half accepts and half rejects. Her mother's native dress she knows as intimately

as randy Bill Clinton's wanderings and American movie fare. Her father's traditional wrist bracelet—emblem of her ethnic heritage—shimmers in this American morning, a combination nearly blinding her with recognition of where her family comes from and where they live now. When the mix of spices and tea makes her "tongue go dry," the effect is both literal and figurative—the speaker as much silenced as enthralled by the scene. Even the curry she knows so fondly both welcomes and threatens her mixed state of Punjabi American, the curry so hot it may burn her lips as does the mother's loving morning kiss. She resides in the midst of what and whom she loves, she the distillate of two cultures and thus partly if not wholly other to them both. As such, the teenager's plight is familiar to generations of immigrants who endure what the African American writer W. E. B. DuBois calls "the double-consciousness"—being both American and other, caught somewhere in the netherworld between. In its subtle and incisive recounting of one Punjabi American morning, the poem becomes the speaker's vehicle for expressing this bewitching blend of personal yet cultural condition.

~ Coda

These poems by youth of various ages pose an articulate and persuasive rebuttal to those who would have poetry dead in the mouths of our young. In meaningful ways poems make family of strangers. They open the door and usher in a reader the poet's never seen before. That gesture makes of poems a risky venture for both writer and reader, for one never knows what one will reveal or discover. In engaging the dialogic experience of a poem, as Hans-Georg Gadamer remarks of engaging even in casual conversation, "one never knows what will come out." Written in solitary labor, worked over endlessly in isolation, often read and enjoyed best alone—the poem yet embodies a communal act. It is the extension of the human hand to another, reaching across the chasm of time, place, social status, even death. This is what makes the writing of a poem, even in desperation, an ultimately optimistic human deed. Writing a poem presupposes a necessary reader, one who shares the writer's breath and thus breathes life into the poem. When Yeats claimed of his poem, "I made it out of a mouthful of air," he subtly acknowledged both the intangible source of the poem and its paradoxically tangible end product. Made only of breath, the poem rises stolid from the page, rises *from* one person *into* another.

SECTION FOUR

After Silence

(Poetry rewards patience,

the soulful lollygag

along a highwire.)

(Hidden Track)

Poetry in Public Places

It's patently ludicrous to believe any poet laureate, whether state or national, can turbocharge American poetry so it once again becomes the single driving force of our literary culture. I know a bit of what I speak. I've been a state laureate for more than six years. The job is Sisyphean, shouldering the boulder of poetry up the steep peak of media disinterest. Yes, there are successes, momentary if not deceptive, in which one entices an audience to believe poetry's word and song matter in their lives. These instants are bracketed by classroom bells or nursing home meds. Then for my audience, it's off to phys ed or physical therapy, and routine again thickens their blood with the mundane. Rather than inciting me to slit my poetic wrists, the transitory nature of what I call "the verse effect" is actually freeing. Like the poem itself, I say what I can say and then fall silent. It is all I *can* do.

Much of the seed I scatter lands on biblical cinders, only to be crushed beneath the wheels of rusted Fords and Chevies. Some spills into the sweaty hands of those who catch and try to pocket it before the long walk home among night's tiny candles. Then the cell phone rings, and they awaken not to dream but to their aged mother's need of bread, cat food, and some help locating the hide-and-seek TV remote. Is this not how art works in the real world? How few of us have had our lives utterly and lastingly altered by a single painting, song, film, or poem? How few have quit our job or left our spouse and kids to chart a new course found among the constellations of art? Yes, yes, a "few," which means not many, meaning some, and that, I say, is enough. Art's best magic conjures its sorcery only among the few, as has always been the case. The rest of us have the solace of momentary reverie, of

evanescent ecstatic release. It tastes sweet and good, or pools bitter as bile upon the tongue, but soon our pulse regains its measure, and we do as well. To effect this change, ephemeral as it is, remains the stock work of the artist. To bewail its transitory nature is to decry its very essence—like flashed insight, flushed emotion, or volcanic orgasm, the transport so enthralls because it is so brief.

During my tenure I have had the pleasure, the distinctly American pleasure, of reading in well over one hundred exotic venues. Those include various primary, middle, and high schools, nursing homes, public parks, community colleges, universities, factories, churches, public libraries, and radio stations. In each, I have been met with a Midwestern blend of curiosity and fear, respect and suspicion—not because of who I am or what my poetry says, but because the poet laureate, as Michael Collier suggests, is a public "figurehead." Though I had little notion of doing so originally, I assumed the role Donald Hall describes as "activist laureate." I became the physical embodiment of an ethereal and intangible notion. I became the tangible expression of what the audience had variously aspired to, admired, feared, detested, or simply ignored. My work and I became a commodity to be inspected, appraised, and purchased or refused—the essential American (is it redundant to say capitalist?) negotiation. All this smacked exotic for me, accustomed as I was to operating on the margins of society that offers at best benign curiosity. In real ways I have felt the pressures of bringing marginalized art into the public sphere where my poems and my person either persuade poetry haters to reconsider their tastes or sadly confirm all their worst assumptions. Despite my sense of what modest achievement might be had, or likely because of it, the experience has been oddly enriching.

The public has little idea of what a poet laureate is and does. Most don't realize the term "laureate" descends from medieval universities' tradition of crowning graduates with laurel leaves (the root, of course, still visible in "baccalaureate") and assigning those specializing in poetry (studied in scholarly Greek and Latin) the label of "poets laureate." Though Virgil had served as Emperor Augustus's court poet, Petrarch is considered the first to be tabbed with the official title of poet laureate in 1341. Later, all manner of kings and fiefdoms kept poets in court to record in verse the nobleman's triumphs—the birth of a prince, the winning of a battle, the beauty of his queen, and so on. If one employed minstrels to play and sing, knights to fight battles, jesters to tell jokes, then one rightly ought to maintain a poet to perform the

court's versifying duties. Over time, the poet laureate's obligation to write such occasional verse fell by the wayside, Wordsworth dispensing with the notion altogether when he served a brief term in his dotage.

Typical of the (mis)assumptions about the role and person of the laureate are the impressions held by the ninety-five sixth-graders to whom I spoke at Gwendolyn Brooks Middle School in Oak Park, Illinois. A bright, lively, and ethnically diverse group, these twelve-year-olds gushed audible astonishment when I sauntered into the half-lit theater. I was not what they'd expected. So I asked them to close their eyes and describe the kind of person they imagined would be laureate. Though they giggled, they were instructively honest in their assessment. The laureate would be white, male, and graying, if not altogether bald. He would carry a cane that he'd rap upon the floor or upon a desk to demand attention. He'd wear tweed, probably one of those elbow-patched houndstooth models favored by the gentry. His accent would be British, or on second thought, thick-tongued French topped off with black beret. He might wear a chin beard, long and pointy, and he would stroke it as he lectured. He would give forth something profound, read a poem or two of his own, and then recite a ditty by someone long dead—and the students wouldn't get any of it. There would be no laughing and no squirming in their seats, or there'd be penance to pay in extra assignments. He would not ask them what *they* like about poetry. He would not beg to hear their poems, verse happily chiming or as cold lonely as February asphalt. The students would not get the chance to pose pressing questions they wanted answers to—queries this group asked and I answered, say, "Can poets get rich from poetry?" (A couple, maybe), "What makes you write poems, anyway?" (I enjoy making things), and "Do you like dogs?" (You bet, especially my yellow lab Lily, or as she's known in the registry, Miss Tiger Lily Delight).

Both precocious and insightful, these young students had framed a familiar dialectic—how might the poet practice an ostensibly elitist art and yet promote its democratic foundations? The question is both keen and intractable. To be a poet *is* to dedicate oneself to an ancient art not widely practiced, to study it with historical fervor and passion of the specialist, and if one is lucky, to become accomplished at what few others do (or perhaps want to do) equally as well. Yet, as laureate, one is trotted out to assure the masses poetry can be theirs too, dilettante poet or mere fan, to sway them to believing poetry's arcane mystery and calling might resonate within their lives as well. One is charged, in sum, to convince the hopeful, the disbeliev-

ing, or the merely distracted that poetry might surge electric within the big democratic life we call community. It's telling to recall Longfellow was the last American poet to achieve such broad-scale embrace for poetry as communal organ. Squandering the wisdom of hindsight, we look around for our time's Whitman, forgetting he was outcast in his own. No wonder the audience doesn't know what to expect.

Among my goals as laureate has been to put poetry in places folks least expected it. One focus has been to visit public libraries in rural or urban locales not generally immersed in the poetry scene. If possible, I wanted to favor Carnegie libraries because of my personal attachment to them. When I was a boy, my hometown's Carnegie library hovered above the factory smog and dust like some enchanted kingdom. Its great dome seemed to ascend the gray Hoosier sky and tinge it blue, if only for the hours I thumbed pages beneath its stained-glass expanse. I've since had the pleasure of reading poetry in the Carnegie libraries of, among others, Delevan and Kewanee, Illinois, staged quaintly before January's blazing fireplace and alongside July's thrown-open, curtain-waving windows. Doing so, I've been reacquainted with my own introduction to books, and that's been thrilling. The labors of the job are thus not wholly altruistic. Anyway, it's wrong to call the laureateship a job, for in most states, as in mine, one's efforts are not supported by stipend, by project budget, or by travel funds. Serving as laureate is thus a form of honorific volunteer work.

One incident at the public library of Mendota, Illinois, stands out for its jumble of humor and poignancy. A brand-spanking-new building much beloved by its citizens, Mendota's library illustrates the pivotal functions libraries serve in small towns. Although "To Read or Not to Read," the NEA's gloomy 2007 report on reading's death rattle in America, describes a culture increasingly inured to reading's allures, the word has not yet reached Mendota. A ragtag blend of Mendotans use the library's computers and the fast Internet connection most citizens can't splurge on for their homes. The children's reading room overflows with kids and parents, a swarming brood skittering this way and that with books tumbling from their arms. High school kids, sporting iPod earphones dangling white lightning from their ears, read at the library's big-shouldered oak tables, feet tapping as their eyes ride the texts' highways. Some old folks thumb newspapers in comfortable chairs, leaning to chat in sour-breathed whispers. In short, the library seems as much social as educational venue.

On the night of my reading, over two hundred folks gathered in the library's largest room, arcing around me on chairs and carpet, spilling out into the hallway. I'd wager not even the librarian had read my poems, so it wasn't me they'd come for. For some the event was akin to going to the movies, poetry transporting them to some distant spot they'd probably never visit or delivering the billowing flames of a car chase gone awry. Though the laureate's silver-screen strangeness lured a few, the event's potent social appeal drew most folks, for the town's yearly poetry competition results were to be announced that evening—a contest whose participants ranged from schoolkids to the blue-haired set.

As I began to read, stillness settled ankle deep about the room like nothing I'd ever experienced. I wasn't fool enough to think my poems induced such hypnotic response. Instead, the audience harbored reverence for the *notion* of poetry, something they considered a private matter of public import. The scene was Rockwellian, yes, but the mood was as lively as any big-city coffeehouse where performance poetries mute the line between audience and artist, poet and performer. The art still breathed life in north central Illinois. And just as notably, poetry bore social relevance as a cultural happening. Men in ill-fitting Sunday suits and guys in overalls puddled beside their wives, dutiful husbands hauled out on a spring evening better suited for planting crops. Gradually, they laughed in the right spots, rustled relaxed in their folding chairs, let out and gathered breath they'd held in while awaiting some great bang they feared as much as expected. Afterward, the mayor awarded me the key to the City of Mendota, steroidal brass too bulky to pocket and shiny with postmodern irony one stifles only through staunch effort. Then I handed out the town's poetry award certificates to young and old alike. In a moment both surreal and quaint, parents asked to photograph their award-winning kid beside me holding the certificate suitable for framing. That photo seemed destined to sleep dust-bunnied under the child's bed or to be zapped to digital ether when someone spring-cleaned the camera's memory stick, but its context I understood. Each parent marked the child's achievement with a Kodak moment. What struck me even more was how poetry still carried societal street cred in this community, where writing a winning poem earned distinction equal to hitting the game-winning basket or jacking the walk-off home run.

As I gathered my books and trundled to the car, a fellow in overalls sidled up, ball cap in hand. He admitted the wife had dragged him with her, first

to Denny's for Thursday's fried chicken special and then for some poetry. He shook my hand, summoning courage, and said, "Buddy, that wasn't half bad." A Midwesterner's compliment. Decoded, what he'd said meant the experience wasn't as painful as he'd expected, that he'd followed at least some of what I'd read, that for him poetry always had been foreign language from a distant land but now at least he knew enough of its strange tongue to order a suitable beer. Is this as good as any laureate can hope to achieve—poetry's momentary society of self and other in the rarefied domain of art?

Over time, I experienced similar fleeting instances where my efforts at poetic *public outreach* struck veins of ore in plots I'd never suspected held gold for them or for me. There was the time all the nursing home ladies—those whom time and family had forgotten—sat smiling, applauding my reading with verve they never gave their daily therapy sessions. They smiled, yes, until one could no longer contain herself and asked when I was going to read some *real* poems because none of mine rhymed. From that I learned to begin with a sonnet and end with a pantoum, leaving the aged welcome among the chiming. There was the time when the pheromonally voiced FM classic rock radio host named Vonda interviewed me on air, begging my apt sound bite right after she cut from The Stones' "Honky Tonk Woman," a moment frozen in the big-hair days of my seventies youth and one that earned props from my teenage son. Then Vonda read the poem she'd written for me that very morning, composed in the shower washing all her best parts. There was the Chicago suburban school in whose library I spoke to two hundred disinterested teenagers conscripted for moral and aesthetic betterment, my first public laureate event. A storm had raged earlier in the day, prompting the library's colander roof to cascade rainwater down a tarp and into a pink plastic tub the flummoxed janitor kept excusing himself to empty. Two guys banged on the roof, chipping at ice and cursing in the elevated manner of my late father. Their thumping so thumped not even the feedbacked microphone carried my voice above the din. Worse yet, the students' half-stifled yawns and sleepily tabled heads demonstrated my poems might, if marketed properly, outsell Ambien as insomnia treatment. Still, six kids in tee-shirts and jeans hung around to show me their snappy Apple-produced alternative literary journal, the first poem as wild as Ginsberg, the last as coy as Marianne Moore. From that I learned to refuse conscripts—they always defect before the second poem's done—and learned as well to study the Weather Channel's hour-by-hour forecast.

When the private-poet/public-verse puzzle seemed hopeless, often but not always a piece fell into place with intoxicating grace. Say, the students of Wheaton High School, who write and prepare all year for their annual poetry coffeehouse. Fueled by the energy of smart and gifted teachers, these students have forged a literary community unheard of in most high schools. Their readers include the usual suspects—literature, art, and theater students—but the group also lassoes football and soccer players, school band members, orchestra students, and the like. What's more, over half of the participants are male, this at the age when most young men imprison their words as well as their emotions behind the stoic stucco of grunts and zits. One factor contributing to poetry's acceptance among these teenage males is the multitude of male (mostly youngish) English teachers who serve as role models for the boys. Shameful but true, it's vastly easier for teenage males to show sensitivity to language, self, and other when they find the same qualities embodied in men they admire.

Then there's the conundrum of my lunchtime reading for workers of Kewanee's Bomag Corporation, factory manufacturing machinery for road paving and construction. As a college undergrad, I'd labored making cardboard, "corrugated paper," as the union suggested we say in public, at Container Corporation of America. (The poet John Knoepfle shares this dubious distinction of tending CCA's night shift.) The factory's piecework rates loomed Olympian, out of mortals' reach, frustrating those daft enough to attempt to best the godly standard rate. Puddling sweat bumped up one's wage ten cents an hour and earned a wink from the lame foreman lounging on his battered wooden stool. The workplace was Death Valley in summer, Greenland in winter. At break, circled in the yellow metal box where in those days one could smoke 'em if one had 'em, the middle-aged men I worked alongside whispered above the coffee cup's curled lip, "Stay in school, kid." For them, for their calling me a fancy-pants poet *mostly* in jest, I pledged to read in a factory.

At Bomag, roughly thirty men and women workers risked indigestion to hear me read. The bulk of them slouched at gray metal tables slamming down pastrami on rye and emptying a thermos of coffee, their idle machines crouched and waiting beyond the cafeteria's double door. I read a poem or two about my factory work; I read something by Philip Levine, something by James Wright. I thanked them and turned to leave. A few lunch-boxed their sandwiches, stood up from their bench's cushionless seat, and asked for

more, intent to fill the ten minutes they owned before toggling themselves and their machines back on. My poems had not enacted a sea change within them, transforming the lot into aficionados of PBS who'll change their truck radios' presets to NPR. Still, though they'd perhaps not read a poem since tenth grade, they'd let me know poetry at least topped the Musak their company customarily piped into the soporific lunchroom.

Joseph Epstein, bright and witty guy he, has identified in his view a number of jobs "not worth having," among them proctologist, urologist, and poet laureate of the United States. He's right if the U.S. laureate or any of the thirty-eight or so state poets laureate has taken on the position as act of self-aggrandizement. The position, rightfully considered, is no big deal. After all, it's more important to be poet than to be laureate. To write one's poems as well as one can, to evolve and find new forms of expression, to extend the art within the culture if only in a minor way, these are much more life-giving and redemptive to both art and society than making the grade school reading circuit. I entertain no illusion that any laureate is singlehandedly going to seduce the broad public to embrace poetry in the manner of previous centuries when poetry faced no competitors for the populace's eyes and ears. But poetic appreciation need not become the focal vortex of one's life for its currents to flood, if only occasionally and transitorily, one's experience of being human.

Then again, unforeseen results issue from what I call "laureateeering," those visits to schools and reading groups and libraries comprising much of what we see as the "activist" laureate's current cultural function. One never knows who is in the audience: what child, old man, or middle-aged woman who might hear the word or phrase they've been searching for but could not find for themselves. Individuals who hear in one's language, or in one's attention to language, the spark to fire their own. Who discover not only a need but also a means to voice what must be spoken. My predecessor as state laureate, Gwendolyn Brooks, grasped both the position's obstinate challenges and its evident possibilities. Equally pertinacious and expectant, she spent long afternoons among schoolchildren. One such young man showing up in Brooks's writers group was Ellis Cose, a high-schooler just beginning to question the color line in 1960s Chicago. Brooks, as was her wont, recognized talent in Cose. As Cose reveals in a 2007 *Newsweek* column, she persuasively encouraged him "to focus on becoming a writer." Deciding "to follow Brooks's advice," Cose embarked, setting out to write his way to

comprehending the fires of April 1968 when his Chicago neighborhood exploded after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Since then, and on a national scale, he's been writing about racial division and the misunderstanding and distrust that fuel it. Might not each laureate, trundling along the school reading circuit, hope to incite the same?

Let me be clear. Influencing one kid to pursue a writer's life is not the same as righting poetry's ship and setting her off with sails in full trim. The cultural workings of art have always been more properly individual and personal, as are its pleasures. It is cliché to suggest that if only one person is affected by any laureate's labors, then—sigh, cue the violins and the lavender sachet stitched within white linen—the work has been successful. That sort of pap embarrasses us all. What I am suggesting is this: while no wholesale popular media revolution in favor of poetry is forthcoming, innumerable tiny epiphanies are as likely as not. The truest revolution resides within the self anyway, and therein lies art's native province.

These results are those we might reasonably expect from public outreach in an age when some proclaim poetry dead upon the citizenry's ears. If we will listen, we will hear poetry's surprise hidden track regale us in the manner of a compact disk we think is done but is not. We will hear poetry's music alive after its ostensible ending, song layered with and after silence. Poetry is dead. Long live poetry. Thus, it is the obligation of the practicing poet, laureate or otherwise, to incite in others and to embody in oneself poetry's afterlife.

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Notes

PREFACE

1. Although Joseph Epstein's essay first appeared more than twenty years ago in the August 1988 issue of *Commentary,* its largest and most engaged audience came with its reprinting in *AWP Chronicle* 21 (May 1989): 1–5, 16–17. Dana Gioia's *Can Poetry Matter?* evolved from Gioia's original article of the same title appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1991): 94. See *Can Poetry Matter?* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 1992). Jonathan Holden's *The Fate of American Poetry* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1991) proposed the return to poetry of moral statement and verse storytelling as solutions to poetry's death throes in the public sphere. Donald Hall's original *Harper's* essay itself bloomed into a full-length book, *Death to the Death of Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

CHAPTER 1

1. Christopher Beach, *Poetic Culture* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 45.

2. Van Wyck Brooks, *America's Coming of Age* (1915), rpt. in *Van Wyck Brooks: The Early Years,* ed. Claire Sprague (New York: Harper, 1968), 82, 86.

3. Philip Rahv, *Image and Idea* (New York: New Directions, 1957), 1.

4. Rahv, *Image and Idea,* 2.

5. Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry,* rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965). See also R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), and D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature,* rev. ed. (New York: Viking, 1964).

6. Stephen Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 10–11.

7. Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 12.

8. Hank Lazer, *Opposing Poetries: Issues and Institutions,* 2 vols. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 1: 1–2.

9. Lazer, *Opposing Poetries,* 1: 37. In volume 1 of his two-volume text, Lazer sets in place the issues and theory that underlie his view of the current bifurcation. In volume 2, Lazer provides extended readings of the poets and poetries that compose his "oppositional" camp. Cogent and at times provocative, Lazer contends that he is neither out to "argue for the moral superiority of one grouping over another" nor proposing a contemporary American poetry curriculum "that omits Adrienne Rich, Robert Lowell, John Ashbery, Michael Harper, James Wright, Lucille Clifton," and others. He does suggest forcefully that "anyone who claims to know about contemporary American poetry had better to know about Language Writing." See 1: 38. For Lazer's readings of specific "oppositional" poets, see volume 2 of his text.

10. For a discussion of Slam poetry and culture, see Beach, *Poetic Culture,* 119–49.

11. See Mark Eleveld, ed., *The Spoken Word Revolution Redux* (Chicago: Source Books, 2007).

12. John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Urbana and Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 11, 22. Employing methods of traditional literary scholarship, folklore studies, linguistics, and philosophical inquiry, Foley produces an eminently readable scholarly study. The book also offers a wealth of related sources, enabling those unfamiliar with spoken word, Slam, and oral poetries to access information across cultures and time periods.

13. Donald Hall, introduction to *Contemporary American Poetry,* ed. Donald Hall (Baltimore: Penguin, 1962), 23.

14. William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1951), 174.

15. George Williamson, "Donne and the Poetry of Today," in *A Garland for John Donne,* ed. Theodore Spencer (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1958), 153–54.

16. Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), 38–39.

17. Rich identifies herself as a "radical feminist" in, among other places, her foreword to *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (New York: Norton, 1987), vii–viii.

18. Marjorie Perloff, *Poetry On and Off the Page* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), xi. Perloff's text provides an intelligent and wide-reaching map of twentieth-century poetics, particularly those modes operating at and through the margins of literary culture.

19. Tony Hoagland, *Real Sofistikashun* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2006), 173–74.

20. Marjorie Perloff, "Poetry Doesn't Matter," *American Book Review* 15, no. 5 (1993): 7.

CHAPTER 2

1. W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (New York: Vintage Books: 1968), 27.

2. Wright witnessed firsthand the debilitating effects of industrialized labor. His father labored a lifetime at Hazel-Atlas Glass, where Wright himself briefly held a job. For commentary on Wright's desire to "get out" of the Ohio River Valley and his guilt at having done so, see my chapter "A 'Dark River of Labor': Work and Workers in James Wright's Poetry," in *Private Poets, Worldly Acts* (1996; rpt., Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999).

3. Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, 1999). Hirsch devotes an extended, passionate discussion to the subject of poetry's ability to express ecstatic transport. See especially pp. 88–115.

4. William Matthews, "The Continuity of James Wright's Poetry," *Ohio Review* 18, no. 2 (1977): 44.

5. David Baker, "Re: Wright," *Kenyon Review* 18, no. 2 (1996): 157.

6. This fragment can be found in the James Wright Papers housed at the University of Minnesota Libraries, specifically in box 39, folder "Rough Drafts for Now I Am Awakened," dated August 10, 1960. As always, I express my gratitude to Anne Wright for her permission to quote from these literary documents.

7. Dave Smith, "The Pure Clear Word: An Interview with James Wright," in *Collected Prose: James Wright,* ed. Anne Wright (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 209.

8. For detailed discussion of Wright's unpublished manuscript *Amenities of Stone* and its various precursor drafts, see my *James Wright: The Poetry of a Grown Man* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989).

9. Felicitas Goodman, *Ecstasy, Ritual, and Alternate Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 44. Goodman's cross-disciplinary study of comparative religion offers a "unified field theory" of religion and human behavior. Among other matters, Goodman looks specifically at relationships among ritual, religious trance, ecstatic experience, and alternate reality.

10. James Wright, "The Terrible Threshold," in *Collected Prose,* 249.

11. James Wright, *Above the River: The Complete Poems,* intro. Donald Hall (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux and University Press of New England, 1990), 7–8. All further references to Wright's published work are to this edition.

12. A bright and disciplined student, Wright was awarded his Kenyon College B. A. degree magna cum laude on June 9, 1952. A photocopy of Wright's transcript (without course grades) is included in his personal papers, Wright Papers, box 24, folder 1.

13. Wright Papers, box 24, folder 2. One can find a photocopy of Professor Coffin's seventeenth-century lyric course examination discussed above. Through

an elaborate and arcane scoring system, Wright earned an 80 on the exam. However, no letter grade is visible on the test.

14. Dave Smith, "Pure Clear Word," 209.

15. William James himself denies having much facility for undergoing mystical experience. In fact, in *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Humane Nature* (New York: Modern Library, 1929), James claims that "my own constitution shuts me out . . . from . . . enjoyment [of mystical states] almost entirely, and I can speak of it only at second hand" (370). Still, James derived much of the spark for his Edinburgh lectures (which evolved into the *Varieties*) from one particularly intense encounter with mystical experience. In 1898, while hiking New York's highest peak, Mount Marcy, James enjoyed a powerful "state of spiritual alertness" and described it in a letter to his wife, Alice: "The influences of Nature, the wholesomeness of the people round me . . . the thought of you and the children, . . . the problem of the Edinburgh lectures, all fermented within me until it became a regular Walpurgis Nacht. I spent a good deal of it in the woods, where the streaming moonlight lit up things in a magical checkered play, and it seemed as if all the Gods of all the nature mythologies were holding an indescribable meeting in my breast with the moral Gods of the inner life. . . . It was indeed worth coming for, and worth repeating year by year, if repetition could only procure what in its nature I suppose must be all unplanned for and unexpected. It was one of the happiest lonesome nights of my existence." James considered the incident part of his "mystical germ," and he believed his own ruminations on mysticism in *Varieties* had root there, as he suggests in a letter to his wife: "Doubtless in more ways than one . . . things in the Edinburgh lectures will be traceable to it." See Henry James, ed., *The Letters of William James,* 2 vols. (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920), 2: 76–77. James's reference to "Walpurgis Nacht" plays off the supposedly wild goings-on characteristic of the eve of May Day, believed in medieval Europe to be the occasion of witches' Sabbath.

16. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience,* 371.

17. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience,* 372.

18. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience,* 372.

19. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience,* 372.

20. *Letters of William James,* 2: 77.

21. Wright Papers, box 53, folder "Drafts 1959–Mostly 1960."

22. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harper, 1961), 14.

23. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience,* 410–11.

24. Wright Papers, box 36, folder "The Branch Will Not Break t.s.—Amenities of Stone."

25. Wright Papers, box 54, folder "MSS: Poetry Castoff Drafts."

26. Wright Papers, box 54, folder "MSS: Poetry Castoff Drafts."

27. Wright Papers, box 36, folder "Poetry Drafts 1962." Nowhere among Wright's voluminous files could I find a typescript of "Facing the Sun with Closed Eyelids." Other critics may be more fortunate. Perhaps Wright did not think enough of the draft to produce a typed version, or perhaps it was merely set aside and buried amid his burgeoning pile. Then again, perhaps he found its despair at odds with the redemptive gestures of *Branch.* Whatever the case, the lyric is darkly vulnerable, easily the equal of the most evocative lyrics of his subsequent collection *Shall We Gather at the River* (1968).

28. Wright, "Meditations on René Char," in *Collected Prose,* 64.

29. Bertrand Russell, *Reason and Responsibility* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1985), 88.

30. Here the speaker's admitting he was "drunk" may well indicate alcohol's agency in achieving such reverie. Surely myriad intoxicants have long been associated with visionary poets' ability to see things in or beyond common reality. The connection between intoxicants and ecstatic visions extends beyond poetry into other realms, of course. See, for instance, Robert Fuller's comprehensive study, *Stairways to Heaven* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), which traces the historical use of intoxicants in ecstatic rituals of American religions loosely imagined in both their churched and unchurched forms.

31. Robert Hass, *Twentieth Century Pleasures* (New York: Ecco Press, 1984), 52.

32. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 282.

33. M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, in Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 8: 184.

CHAPTER 3

1. Peter Davis, ed., *Poet's Bookshelf: Contemporary Poets on Books That Shaped Their Art* (Selma, IN: Barnwood Press, 2005). A small press and cooperative begun in Indiana in 1975, Barnwood Press printed Davis's book of lists. The project evolved from Davis's having once asked a teacher for a reading list during his MFA studies, which gave him the notion to ask contemporary poets for their own lists. These poets responded to two prompts: "1) Please list 5–10 books that have been most 'essential' to you, as a poet. 2) Please write some comments about your list. You may want to single out specific poems or passages from the books, discuss how you made your decisions, or provide thoughts about the importance of these books in your life" (vi).

2. Henry Louis Gates, *Signifying Monkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1989), xxiv.

3. See William Harmon, ed., *The Top 500 Poems* (New York: Columbia University

Press, 1992), 1077. To be sure, offering even a representative list of such anthologies would consume more space than is well spent here. A simple computerized library catalog title search using the key words "best poems" calls up over ten thousand titles in response. Entering the phrase "best poems in English" also culls ten thousand titles. In addition, each year one distinguished poet-editor is chosen to select from the surfeit of poems published in our literary journals *The Best American Poetry.* Suffice it to say, marketers have concluded the most efficient and profitable way to sell verse to contemporary readers is to reduce all poets and all poetry to an assembled "greatest hits." Such a compilation makes contemporary readers' task much cushier, having ceded the legwork of research and the heavy lifting of critical appraisal to an esteemed editor.

4. Davis, *Poet's Bookshelf,* 200.

5. David Gates, "The Man with Two Brains." *Newseek,* February 5, 2007, 61.

6. Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems* (New York: Corinth Books, 1960), 52.

7. James Wright, *The Branch Will Not Break* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), 13.

8. Frank O'Hara, *Lunch Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1964), 27.

9. William Carlos Williams, *Journey to Love* (New York: Random House, 1955), 24.

10. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1947), 54. Kandinsky published *Uber das Geistige in der Kunst* in the original German edition in 1912. It was first published in an English translation by Michael Sadleir in 1914, a version authorized by Kandinsky, under the title *The Art of Spiritual Harmony.* The 1947 edition quoted here is a version of the Sadleir translation, "with considerable re-translation, by Francis Golffing, Michael Harrison, and Ferdinand Ostertag." The 1947 edition was authorized by Mme. Kandinsky.

11. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* 54.

12. James Wright, *To a Blossoming Pear Tree* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), 59.

CHAPTER 4

1. Richard Perez-Pena, "U.S. Newspaper Circulation Falls 10%," *New York Times,* October 26, 2009. Perez-Pena cites as causes "rising Internet readership, price increases, the recession, and papers intentionally shedding unprofitable circulation."

2. Riley flipped emotional gymnastics upon receiving Longfellow's encouraging comments of November 30, 1876. Here is much of Longfellow's four-paragraph response: "Not being in the habit of criticising the productions of others, I can not enter into any minute discussion of the merits of the poems you sent me.

I can only say in general terms, that I have read them with great pleasure, and think they show the true poetic faculty and insight. The only criticism I shall make is on your use of the word *prone* in the thirteenth line of 'Destiny.' Prone means face-downward. You meant to say *supine* as the context shows." See *Letters of James Whitcomb Riley,* ed. William Lyon Phelps (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1930), 12–13.

3. Riley's faux-Poe later appeared in his books *Armazindy* (1894), *Love Lyrics* (1899), and *The Lockerbie Book* (1899). A full accounting of the circumstances surrounding the origin and execution of the hoax can be found in Richard Crowder's *Those Innocent Years* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1957), and Jeannette Covert Nolan's *James Whitcomb Riley: Hoosier Poet* (New York: Julian Messner, Inc., 1941). Also see *The Complete Works of James Whitcomb Riley,* vol. 1, ed. Edmund Henry Eitel (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1913), for an extensive endnote discussion of the incident. Riley's letter to C. B. Foote, a book collector who had come into possession of the Ainsworth graced with the faux-Poe, is dated November 22, 1886, and can be found in *Letters of James Whitcomb Riley,* 63–65. My summary of the events owes to these sources.

4. Crowder, *Those Innocent Years,* 82.

5. *Complete Works of James Whitcomb Riley,* 1:442.

6. This volume, an early Athenaeum Press book, was a favorite of high school and college classrooms, especially in Riley's Midwest. Its scholarly goal is rather immoderately described on the frontispiece in this way: "A Study of the Men and the Books that in the Earlier and Later Times Reflect the American Spirit." Despite the volume's patriarchal invocation of the "Men" who shaped our literature, a few women make the cut, say, Anne Bradstreet, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the later poets Sara Teasdale and Amy Lowell. See William J. Long, ed., *American Literature* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1913).

7. Long, *American Literature,* 358, 370–71.

8. Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), 91–92.

9. Harriet Monroe, "Newspaper Verse," *Poetry* 19 (March 1922): 324–30. Monroe quotes from the editorials at the outset of her own piece on page 324.

10. Monroe, "Newspaper Verse," 325.

11. Monroe, "Newspaper Verse," 329.

12. Monroe, "Newspaper Verse," 329.

CHAPTER 5

1. See the "Project Description" available at http://www.americanlifeinpoetry.org.

2. Mr. Kooser detailed this exchange in an email to me, dated August 3, 2007.

What's more, because Kooser's wife and son work in journalism, the medium is both familiar and welcoming to him.

3. Project Description, http://www.americanlifeinpoetry.org. These numbers, it should be stated, represent pre-2008–9 recession estimates of newspaper participation and public readership. Given the resultant sad demise of many American daily newspapers, one can assume that recession-corrected figures reasonably will reflect a drop in both participation and readership.

4. Sharon Olds, *The Wellspring* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). See also Kooser's "Column 70" at http://www.americanlifeinpoetry.org.

5. David Baker, "Mongrel Heart," *Southeast Review* 23, no. 5 (2005). See also Kooser's "Column 44" at http://www.americanlifeinpoetry.org.

6. One can read Chasar's account of his newspaper-poet experiences in "Writing Good Bad Poetry," *Poets & Writers* (November–December 2008): 39–44.

7. See *Philadelphia Inquirer,* December 29, 2006.

CHAPTER 6

1. Paul Valéry, "The Conquest of Ubiquity," in *Aesthetics,* trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 225.

2. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations,* ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1968), 223.

3. Benjamin, "Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 225.

4. Benjamin, "Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 227.

5. Barbara Hernstein Smith, "Poetry as Fiction," in *New Directions in Literary History,* ed. Ralph Cohen (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 173–74.

6. Benjamin, "Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 233.

7. Benjamin, "Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 233.

8. Benjamin, "Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 241.

9. Benjamin, "Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 234.

10. Aldous Huxley, *Beyond the Mexique Bay: A Traveller's Journal.* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), 274 ff.

11. Benjamin, "Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 234.

12. Joseph Epstein, "Who Killed Poetry?" *AWP Chronicle* 21 (May 1989): 1–5, 16–17.

13. Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur* (New York: Currency/Doubleday, 2007).

14. Stacy Schiff, "Know It All," *New Yorker,* July 31, 2006, 40.

15. Schiff, "Know It All," 40–41.

16. The range of Essjay's purported knowledge ought to have raised a red flag.

His first contributions to Wikipedia dealt mainly with his supposed field of religious studies expertise: penitential rite, transubstantiation, and the papal tiara. But he quickly branched out into wildly diverse areas, correcting, for instance, another person's entry on Justin Timberlake that asserted Timberlake had lost his home in 2002 for tax default. Essjay, says the *New Yorker,* knew this statement "to be false" (Schiff, "Know It All," 40–41). Essjay seems to have made Wikipedia his substitute for not having received his degree and thus not having a classroom of students to whom to dispense knowledge. His efforts have earned praise from Wikipedians, who have awarded him symbolic "barnstars" in recognition of his contributions, including Random Acts of Kindness Barnstars and Tireless Contributor Barnstar (41).

One can imagine the fierce competition between Wikipedia and *Encyclopedia Britannica,* the former leader in the field, a struggle all the more meaningful to *Britannica* as it works to stay relevant and financially solvent in the digital era. Essjay's misrepresented qualifications aside, embarrassments regarding entry accuracy have further undercut Wikipedia's credentials, especially in academe. Even cofounder Larry Sanger, who left Wikipedia in the aftermath of the 2001–2 tech meltdown, "argues that too many Wikipedians are fundamentally suspicious of experts and unjustly confident of their own opinions" (Schiff, "Know It All," 42). Another early force in open-source communities, Eric Raymond suggests that "'disaster' is not too strong a word" for what Wikipedia has become, a confederacy of digital dunces and a site "infested with moonbats" (42). A recent *Nature* survey comparing forty-two entries on scientific matters found in both Wikipedia and *Britannica* showed that Wikipedia had "four errors for every three of Britannica's," a finding that oddly pleased Wikipedia and sent Britannica into high spin-control in defense of its scholarship and editorial review.

17. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, intro. Bertrand Russell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 115, 117, 119. Wittgenstein's discussion of the visual field is part of a fascinating discussion of how the limits of language provide the limits of our world. He argues the metaphysical subject does not belong to the world but rather "is a limit of the world." Prefacing the drawing reproduced here, Wittgenstein asks: "Where *in* the world is the metaphysical subject to be found? You will say that this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field. But really you do *not* see the eye. And nothing *in the visual field* allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye. For the form of the visual field is surely not like this."

18. Benjamin, "Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 237, 238.

19. Valéry, "Conquest of Ubiquity," 226.

20. Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2008), 14.

21. Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *Atlantic* 301, no. 6 (2008): 57. In assuming that his brain is not a fixed entity and may indeed be "rewired" by his reading habits, Carr's thinking aligns with much current scientific research on the brain's malleability. He cites James Olds of George Mason University's Krasnow Institute for Advanced Study to bolster his own anecdotal experience: "The brain has the ability to reprogram itself on the fly, altering the way it functions." In sum, the brain, says Olds, is "very plastic," regularly forming new connections and disconnecting others (60).

22. Carr cites the work of Maryanne Wolf, a Tufts University developmental psychologist and author of *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), who remarks, "We are *how* we read." Wolf argues that reading online promotes a mode of attention that values "efficiency" and "immediacy" above all else. She also worries that reading online makes of us "mere decoders of information" (58).

23. Benjamin, "Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 242.

24. An executive summary of the NEA's research report no. 47, "To Read or Not to Read" (2007), cites these statistics garnered from the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation, "Media Multitasking among Youth: Prevalence, Predictors, and Pairings" (no. 7592) (2006). See "To Read or Not to Read," 8–9.

25. For those seeking a useful introduction to the issue and sources for further study, Sharon Begley and Jeneen Interlandi nicely summarize these and other approaches to the issue of digital corruption of American youth in their article "The Dumbest Generation? Don't Be Dumb," *Newsweek,* June 2, 2008, 43–44.

26. See Mark Bauerlein's *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (or, Don't Trust Anyone under 30)* (New York: Penguin, 2008).

27. Benjamin, "Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 239.

28. Gioia's remark first appeared in his influential essay "Can Poetry Matter?" *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1991): 94. He later extended his ruminations into book form, also titled *Can Poetry Matter?* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 1992). Bemoaning poetry's lost audience, Gioia offers six "modest proposals" for helping poetry "again become part of American public culture." Briefly summarized, Gioia's suggestions include asking poets to read work by other poets in their public readings; combining poetry with other arts at readings; encouraging poets to write prose about poetry; urging editors who compile anthologies to accept only poems they truly admire (and not those of cronies, pals, or sycophants); persuading teachers to spend more time on classroom performance of as opposed to analysis of poetry; and using radio to expand poetry's audience.

29. In his *Poetic Culture,* Christopher Beach offers an insightful overview of Holman's methods and goals for *The United States of Poetry.* Beach suggests that

Holman, for the most part, chose to privilege poets outside of the academy, poets possessing political attitudes, and poets indebted in various ways to hip-hop and performance modes. Because the series largely overlooks university-connected poets—arguably the largest percentage of current poets— and gives only shallow coverage to linguistically inventive poets, Beach suggests the series ought to have been titled "The United States of Marginalized Poetry." See *Poetic Culture* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 150–69.

30. These and many more informational tidbits can be found in the NEA's "Reading on the Rise: A New Chapter in American Literacy" (2008). Many encouraging results can be cited, such as the report's claim of 16.6 million new adult readers of literature between 2002 and 2008. To be fair, however, not everything in the report is unabashedly good news. For instance, a portion of those 16.6 million new readers can be attributed merely to population growth. Distressingly, the readerships for American adult readers of poetry (8.3 percent) and drama (2.6 percent) continue to languish.

CHAPTER 7

1. One may say Stefans is curiously iconoclastic toward the iconoclast digital poetry he practices, as he argues that cyberpoetry "does not exist" as what he calls "a genuine verse-form" because it lacks "singular positive definitions." Instead, he is able to define it "only in negatives: 1) the lack of limitation to black and white words on a page, 2) the lack of possibility for mechanical reproduction (there being no original), and 3) the lack of closure and the lack of the lack of choice" (45–46). Stefans argues "the space between sentences is where the action of cyberpoetry happens," suggesting print poets as well as digital poets can achieve this end. He cites the Language and print poet Ron Silliman as an example and submits that Ezra Pound's noted poem "The Life and Times of Hugh Selwyn Mauberly" can also be considered "a cyberpoem" in this regard (53). See *Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics* (Berkeley: Atelos, 2003). O'Connor claims the "multi-media capabilities for simulating new meanings" exist in print as well as digital verse. He maintains: "Signification does not have to exist on a computer screen or on the Internet to create virtual/poetic potentialities. Poetic expression is not inherent in the abstract forms or structures of printed language either; instead, they exist [quoting M.M. Bakhtin] 'in the concrete poetic construction . . . whatever its form may be'" (5). He submits Langston Hughes, David Trinidad, John Kinsella, and David Wojahn as examples of printed-text poets he regards as new media practitioners. See *Poetic Acts & New Media* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007). Adalaide Morris posits new media poems are actually "positioned in an expanded field that is neither poetry nor not-poetry but an active exchange" between two divergent discourse modes. See

Morris, "New Media Poetics: As We May Think/How to Write," in *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories,* ed. Adalaide Morris and Thomas Swiss (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 19. Loss Pequeno Glazier traces digital poetics to sources in Modernist poetries of the early twentieth century and argues for the electronic space as poetry's ultimate expression and true "space of poesis." See Glazier, *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002). For an overview of qualities associated with digital verse, see Stephanie Strickland, "Writing the Virtual: Eleven Dimensions of E-Poetry," *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* 14, nos. 5–6 (2006): 1–18.

2. For an outline of the current bifurcation of American page-based poetries, see chapter 1. Also, for insight into "opposing" print-based poetries, see Hank Lazer's two-volume consideration of poetry set against the current dominant mode: vol. 1, *Opposing Poetries: Issue and Institutions* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996) and vol. 2, *Opposing Poetries: Readings* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999).

3. Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,* trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 80.

4. Glazier, *Digital Poetics,* 1.

5. Talan Memmott, "Beyond Taxonomy: Digital Poetics and the Problem of Reading," in Morris and Swiss, *New Media Poetics,* 293.

6. N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 3.

7. Hayles, *Electronic Literature,* 3. Hayles also offers useful commentary on the ELO committee process and its results.

8. Alan Filreis, "Kinetic Is as Kinetic Does: On the Institutionalization of Digital Poetry," in Morris and Swiss, *New Media Poetics,* 128.

9. Marjorie Perloff, "Screening the Page, Paging the Screen: Digital Poetics and the Differential Text," in Louis Armand, *Contemporary Poetics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 376.

10. To access audio and video poetry selections performed by various Illinois poets, visit http://www.poetlaureate.il.gov and http://www.bradley.edu/poet. Audio and video poems presented on the Bradley site continually rank at the top of visitor hit records. This site averages over 350,000 hits per year; of these hits, roughly 50 percent visit the audio and video poetry offerings.

11. Joseph's poetry video of "In the Book Store" can be found at http://www.poetlaureate.il.gov/videopoetry.cfm. The poem appears in print in Joseph's *Soul Train* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1997).

12. See http://e-poets.net/ to access archived poets. The site contains a generous selection of video and documentary poems and an equally large repository of audio poems by a range of Chicago-area and national performers, includ-

ing Luis Rodriguez, Maureen Seaton, David Ray, Mark Perlberg, and Tyhemiba Jess. Filreis's site can be found at http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/authors.php.

13. This site can be found at http://ubu.com/.

14. Kurt Heintz, http://gerardwozek.com/video.htm. See also Heintz's description of the origin and intentions of video poetry at http://video.e-poets.net/about.shtml. He is founder of the e-poets network.

15. See "Passage," by Quraysh Ali Lansana, http://video.e-poets.net/composed.shtml.

16. One should Google, for instance, Herman Berlandt's San Francisco Poetry Film Festival (held yearly from the mid-1980s); the National Poetry Film and Video Festival, sponsored by Chicago's Guild Complex; Vancouver's Visible Verse festival, administered by artist Heather Haley; the Sadho Poetry Film Festival, in New Dehli; Le Instants Video festival, in Aix-en-Provence, France; and the Poetikas Poetry Film Festival in Barcelona, Spain.

17. See http://www.poetryvisualized.com/media/2415/Frozen_Blistered_Hand/.

18. See http://www.poetryvisualized.com/media/1664/Blackbirds/.

19. Richard Lanham, "The Electronic Word: Literary Study and the Digital Revolution," *New Literary History* 20 (Winter 1989): 279.

20. See Jerome McCann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

21. Talan Memmott, "Active / on Blur," an interview with Mark Amerika, in *Meta/Data: A Digital Poetics,* ed. Mark Amerika (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 242.

22. Adrian Miles, "Postcinematic Writing," an interview with Mark Amerika, in *Meta/Data,* 229.

23. Visit http://epc.buffalo.edu/e-poetry.

24. Here, for example, one can encounter Stefans's oft-remarked-on "the dreamlife of letters" (1999), his alphabetic sequence producing words and phrases for each letter of the alphabet, all of them animated in striking fashion upon a square orange frame. Stefans's poem is linked to the UbuWeb site via http://www.ubu.com/contemp/stefans/dream/index.html.

25. See especially the introduction to Glazier's *Digital Poetics.* For an acute literary history of concrete and moving text poetry, see also Teemu Ikonen, "Moving text in avant-garde poetry: Towards a poetics of textual motion," *dichtung-digital.de,* Newsleter 4/2003, 5. Jg/Nr.30. ISSN 1617-6901. ed by Markku Eskelinen, 2003. http://www.dichtung_digital.com/2003/4_ikonen.htm.

26. Peter Howard, "Xylo," Wordcircuits, available at http://www.wordcircuits.com/gallery/xylo; accessed December 2008.

27. Loss Pequeno Glazier, "White-Faced Bromelaids on 20 Hectares," avail-

able at http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/glazier/java/costa1/00.html; accessed December 2008.

28. See Jim Andrews's gathering of Stir Fry texts and his theoretical commentary on the form at http://www.vispo.com/.

29. Jim Andrews, "Arteroids 2.5," *poemsthatgo* 14 (Fall 2003), available at http://www.poemsthatgo.com/gallery/fall2003/arteroids; accessed December 2008.

30. Andrews provided this overview in an email to me dated May 14, 2009.

31. Lyn Wells, "Virtual Textuality," in *Reading Matters: Narratives in the New Media Ecology,* ed. Joseph Tabbi and Michael Wutz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 252.

32. Seb Chevrel and Gabe Kean, "You and We," originally appearing in *Born Magazine,* available at http://www.bornmagazine.org/youandwe/; accessed December 2008. In November 2009, nearly a year following my accessing the new media poem, its trove had grown to "10,163 txts, 4,484 imgs."

33. Kenneth Goldsmith, "Flarf & Conceptual Writing: Introduction," *Poetry* (July/August 2009): 315. Although I have focused on Flarf poets largely because of their use of the Internet as digital poetic source and tool, Conceptual poets—while differing in tone and form—do share some characteristics with Flarf proponents. Many Conceptual poets favor the sampling of nonpoetic texts in order to, using the Russian Formalist critics' phrase, "defamiliarize" this writing and give it fresh urgency. For example, Goldsmith's *Day* transcribes the entire text of a single day's *New York Times* and posits it as a nine-hundred-page poetry book. Likewise, Robert Fitterman's "Directory" presents as poem just what its title suggests—a directory culled from a mall listing rearranged with attention to form and sound. What's curious is the fashion in which these "new" poetries make use of earlier Modernist and Dadaist modes. One could argue, for instance, that Conceptual poetry is rebirth of the "found" poem. One may also suggest that Flarf poets are merely pursuing—with a greater emphasis on humor and on the absurd—what previous Modernist poets did by interpolating other texts within their own. Stealing from other texts, as did Pound, Eliot, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams (in his *Paterson*), is hardly new. See also Charles Olson's and Paul Metcalf's experiments along those lines. Where these poets and their texts differ, however, may be in Flarf's inherent playfulness (as opposed to Modernism's deadly seriousness) and in Flarf's embrace of digital technologies not available to prior poets.

34. Juri Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text,* trans. Ronald Vroon, Michigan Slavic Contributions no. 7 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 99.

35. Compiled by the ELO, the Electronic Literature Collection gathers over sixty examples of e-lit. It may be found at http://collection.eliterature.org. As an offshoot of her book *Electronic Literature,* Hayles created an outstanding resource

for those interested in teaching courses devoted to e-literature: visit http://newhorizons.eliterature.org. Here one discovers syllabi, original essays, and e-lit authors' biographies. Among essay topics discussed are navigation as a signifying strategy, finding and interpreting the code, and architecture as trope and visualization.

36. Hayles, *Electronic Literature,* 4.

37. Perloff, "Screening the Page, Paging the Screen," 377.

38. Memmott, "Beyond Taxonomy," 305.

CHAPTER 8

1. Dana Gioia examines libraries' fetish for poets' literary manuscripts, drafts, and worksheets in "The Hand of the Poet: The Magical Value of Manucripts," one chapter of his *Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2004). Gioia devotes much energy and attention to tracing the "magical" power inherent in viewing the poet's handwritten manuscripts and offers historical context for readers' fascination with them.

2. James Dickey, "In the Presence of Anthologies," *Sewanee Review* 66 (Spring 1958): 294–314. See also Richard Foster, "Debauched by Craft: Problems of the Younger Poets," *Perspective* 12 (Spring–Summer 1960): 3–17. Against the mostly traditional poems gathered in *New Poets of England and America,* a more experimental and edgy compilation appeared in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (New York: Grove, 1960). Landing in one or the other anthology had the effect of cubbyholing poets into opposing and seemingly irreconcilable camps.

3. James Wright's literary papers, drafts, worksheets, and manuscripts can be found in the James Wright papers housed at the University of Minnesota Libraries. All of the manuscript materials I quote from in this essay can be found in these holdings. As always, I thank Anne Wright for her permission to quote from these documents.

4. For an extended discussion of *Amenities of Stone,* see my *James Wright: The Poetry of a Grown Man* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1989). There, one can also find the entire text of Wright's "His Farewell to Old Poetry."

5. Stein, *James Wright,* 138–39.

6. Richard Friedman, "The Wesleyan Poets III: The Experimental Poets," *Chicago Review* 19, no. 2 (1966): 73.

7. Among James Wright's papers, I have been unable to detect a typescript of this unpublished poem. Handwritten, "The Continental Can Company at Six O'clock" appears on a draft of Wright's poem "Rain," a poem that itself later appeared in *Branch.* Wright's characteristically pinched handwriting has the look of someone writing under a rush of emotion. Next to the poem's title, and separated by a slash, Wright has written what appears to be "Bulbs like a thunderhead

trying to / snuff out / whole cities." A marginal note in Wright's handwriting and an arrow pointing roughly to the middle of the poem indicate, "This material used in *3 Letters.*" Thirteen lines of "Continental Can" thus mysteriously reappear, somewhat revised, elsewhere in *Amenities.* Wright includes them in "Three Letters in One Evening," a long, unpublished narrative on the death of Jenny, the dead lover/muse and ethereal spirit of place frequenting many of his poems. In this instance, each "car-hood is a dark sloop bearing / Living men under water." Incidentally, though not surprisingly, given the fall of America's industrial base, the Continental Can Company closed its factory doors decades ago, leaving these workers without even the solace of a paycheck.

8. Robert Kelly, "Notes on the Poetry of the Deep Image," *Trobar* 2 (1961): 16.

9. Hank Lazer, *Opposing Poetries,* vol. 1, *Issues and Institutions* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 61, and *Opposing Poetries,* vol. 2, *Readings* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 100.

10. The poem appears in this draft of *Amenities* just as it does in James Wright's *The Branch Will Not Break* (Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), except for Wright's cross-outs.

11. This March 5, 1961, *Amenities* draft of the poem appears in exactly the same form as it does eventually in *Branch.*

12. James Wright, interview with Bruce Henricksen, "Poetry Must Think," *New Orleans Review* 6, no. 3 (1978): 201–7, rpt. in *James Wright: Collected Prose,* ed. Anne Wright (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983).

13. Louis D. Rubin, "Revelations of What Is Present," *Nation,* July 13, 1963, 39.

14. David Baker, "Re: Wright," *Kenyon Review* 18, no. 2 (1996): 157.

CHAPTER 9

1. One indication that awareness of this technological advancement has ventured beyond the pages of techno periodicals and even consumer-oriented computer magazines is this: the topic has breached the pages of the mass-circulation, coffee-table weekly *Newsweek.* See Steven Levy's largely unflattering review of present BookSnap technology, "Rip This Book? Not Yet," *Newsweek,* February 18, 2008, 24. As Levy suggests, "The very existence of a consumer book scanner is one of those early warnings of turbulence to come." The BookSnap's inventor, Sarasin Booppanon, twenty-eight, of Thailand, envisions use of such scanners eventually to become humdrum and widespread. The scanner will enable consumers to "digitize their own library" and carry it with them—say, on a beach vacation. While such innovation would surely make less unwieldy the current back-breaking effort of moving one's books from apartment to apartment, old home to new, it also heralds changes in the ways one regards and interacts with future versions of the "book."

CHAPTER 10

1. Daniel Golden, "From Disturbed High Schooler to College Killer," *Wall Street Journal,* August 20, 2007. Golden's incisive article provides a number of insights into not only Cho's school experience but also current administrative practice dealing with emotionally troubled youths.

2. See Elizabeth Bernstein, "Schools Struggle with Dark Writings," *Wall Street Journal,* May 20, 2008.

CHAPTER 11

1. Stephanie Forrest's "Shatter" appeared in the lively undergraduate national literary journal *Susquehanna Review* 5 (2007): 62.

CHAPTER 12

1. Jay Parini, "Why Poetry Matters," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* June 27, 2008, B16. Parini also extended his ruminations into a full-length volume, *Why Poetry Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). Parini's title—as well as his argument—no doubt play off Gioia's earlier volume *Can Poetry Matter?*

2. Parini, "Why Poetry Matters," B11.

3. As if to feed the flame of concern that participants value theatrics over poetics, recent winners' comments openly acknowledge the importance of the stage. Amanda Fernandez's advice to potential entrants reveals her own awareness of the pressure to "act" one's reading: "Be about the work. If you are there for the money and the fame, the judges will see it, and the work onstage won't be truthful. . . . Follow the guidelines about not overdramatizing a piece. . . . You don't have to be an actor. Just to be a human being connected to other human beings is . . . the message of a great artist, a great poet." In addition, Virginia state champion Alanna Rivera admits, "I started out thinking I was doing this all for the sake of performing, but I ended up reestablishing my relationship with poetry." See *NEARTS* 4 (2007): 10–11.

4. *NEARTS* 2 (2008): 10.

5. Billy Collins, *Sailing Alone Around the Room: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Random House, 2002), 16.

6. See Paul Hoover, ed., *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994); Billy Collins, ed., *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry* (New York: Random House, 2003); Billy Collins, ed., *180 More: Extraordinary Poems for Every Day* (New York: Random House, 2005).

7. Tony Hoagland, *Donkey Gospel* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 1998), 10.

8. . To find online this and other poems written by the hip-hop artist Tupac Shakur, see http://www.alleyezonme.com/poetry/index/phtml.

CHAPTER 13

1. This piece was cowritten by then-fifth-graders Cole Anderson, Grant Dutton, and Eric Rosenwinkel in Ms. Heather Farrar's class at Benjamin Franklin Elementary in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. See the Youth Poetry page at http://www.bradley.edu/poet for this and other poems by young Illinois poets.

2. See the Youth Poetry page, http://www.bradley.edu/poet. Marisa Rosario was a fourth-grade student of Ms. Judy Metzger at Courtenay Language Arts Center, Chicago, Illinois.

3. See the Youth Poetry page, http://www.bradley.edu/poet. Student poet Ryan Vince worked with now-retired teacher Ms. Susan Lindberg at Gwendolyn Brooks Middle School in Oak Park, Illinois.

4. Planning a career in medicine, Jessica currently studies microbiology at the University of Illinois—Champaign/Urbana. She was the student of Ms. Joyce Norman at Buffalo Grove High School in Arlington Heights, Illinois. See winners of 2006 Poems of Special Merit page, IATE Poetry Contest, http://www.bradley.edu/poet.

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