

SELECTED POEMS | Bob Shepherd

Selected Poems

(with Essays on Poetry, Storytelling, and
Literary Criticism)

Robert D. Shepherd

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DEDICATION

To Brooke, *Il miglior fabbro*

CONTENTS

LYRIC POEMS

TO A YOUNG POET	2
FIVE NOCTURNES	3
TERROIR	6
SAPPHO SPEAKS ACROSS THE AGES TO HER LOST LOVE	8
CECI N'EST PAS UN POÈME D'AMOUR	9
HISTORY LESSON (ON THE <i>HINTERWELTLERN</i>)	13
TSUKI (SHINOBI MOON)	15
MIDSUMMER, NO FAIRIES	16
SAMHAIN	18
FOR A FRIEND ON HER BIRTHDAY	20
IN MYSTERIA, A FRAGMENT	22
ON SEEING FOXY MISS MOXY'S RISQUÈ CABERET	24
EPITHALAMION	25
THE PROGNOSIS FOR POETRY IN THE AGE OF TAN IN A CAN	29
BACK TO BASICS (NOTHING THAT IS IS NOTHING)	32
I AM AN IDIOT	34
ON LEARNING THAT HOPKINS BURNED SOME OF HIS POETRY	36
THE STUDENT OF BLISS	37
MIDSUMMER (FROM THE NOVEL PAGAN MOON)	39

THE CHARGE OF THE GODDESS 40
SHIVA AT THE DMV 42
CENTCOM DXES K'S KPIS 43
MY EXPERIENCE IN CORPORATE AMERICA 47
JESUS AND I 50

OCCASIONAL, LIGHT, AND POLITICAL VERSE

TO DON THE CON, REPUGNICAN, WITH APOLOGIES TO EBB 52
STOPPING BY SCHOOL ON A DISRUPTIVE AFTERNOON 53
TRUMP CARD 54
FACT CHECK 55
RUDOLPH, DON'S BROWN-NOSED REIGN DEAR 56
SCHOOL IS A CUCUMBER 57
ROAD TRIP 58
TUMPANZEE RHAPSODY 59
O DONNIE BOY I 61
O DONNIE BOY II 62
THE SIX LIVES OF DONALD THE WURST 3
PATRIOTIC NOISE 64
TO THE HONORABLE ELIZABETH A. WARREN 67
AUTOCORRECT POEMS 69
OMG! SOMETHING IS NOT PURRFECT HERE!!! 71
THE CORING OF THE SIX HUNDRED 75

**ESSAYS ON POETRY, STORYTELLING,
AND LITERARY CRITICISM**

ON READING AND WRITING POEMS 78
NOTES TOWARD ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS "WHERE DO

SELECTED POEMS | Bob Shepherd

POETRY AND LANGUAGE COME FROM?" 83

ON SILENCES IN POETRY 86

ON OBSCURITY IN POETRY 88

WHAT MAKES HUMANS HUMAN? 92

APPROACHES TO LITERARY CRITICISM 98

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 105

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Thanks to my mother, who read poetry to me when I was too young to read it on my own. Thanks to my friends and romantic partners over the years for the gift of them and for inspiring some of this work. Thanks to my readers, who are so few, alas, but all the more precious.

LYRIC POEMS

TO A YOUNG POET

Your work is grounded in Earth,
mycelia conspiring with roots
to fashion, again, the wordless
lotus, its petals, tongues.

FIVE NOCTURNES

1

Folly Cove

A lone bird skittering
Over cold sea foam cries,
“Where is she? Where is my love?”

2

The Author at His Desk

As I wrote this, tonight,
A gazelle leapt at the edge of
 my consciousness
Or was it her, stirring in her sleep?

3

Presentation of Symptoms; Diagnosis

She said to me once, “I don’t care about philosophy.”
I thought, “What is the meaning of this?”

Irreconcilable differences.

4

Layla and Majnun

A story from the Persian

Qays al-Mulawwah fell for Layla,
Fell like a drunken man into a ditch
Down the rabbit hole of his own love,

Never to climb back out again.
Her father refused their marriage,
And banished Qays to the desert.

There, under a crescent moon, his longing
So warped time and space as to shake
A handful of stars from their revolving sphere.
They became wanderers—the planets—forever seeking,
And people started calling him majnun, “possessed.”
Such was his divanaagi, or “love madness,”
His fanaa, or “annihilation.”

Night after night, Layla, in her garden apart,
Having stolen from the bed of a husband she did not love,
Paced until she wore a track beside the garden walls,
Envyng, as she walked, the jasmine and honeysuckle,
Whose essence could rise beyond those walls,
Willing her spirit to do the same.
Her yearning taught the moths their fierce abandon,
So that to this day, they throw themselves
Onto the flame of their desire, fanaa.

*I am Layla of the Persian romance,
And I am master of the arts of love.
Even the moth is my disciple.*

Thirteen hundred years later, a British rocker recalled the story.
Now I, in the desert of my separate bed, majnun,
Recall the song he named for her.
In my head, I crank the music louder and louder
Until the sounds crack the ceiling:

LAY – LA, darling won't you ease my worried mind?

The Fox and the Grapes

Better off without you, he said,
Pouring out the drink
He had convinced himself
He never wanted to begin with.

TERROIR

NB: Terroir is a term from viticulture for the characteristic soil and climate of a place, which combine to give the grapes grown in a region, and the wine from these grapes, particular characteristics. The dog and frog were sacred to Hecate. The ravens and the thickening of the light are portents from Macbeth, Act III, scene ii.

Listen. In the gloaming, a dog is barking, a frog croaking.
Ravens gather at the wood's edge. Light thickens,
And its very thickening invites you to attune your senses,
To empty your mind, to push your fear to the extremities
Of your corporeal being and make of it a weapon.
Your navel is a fulcrum. You wait and watch.

This is the moment for which all else was but preparation.
This is the borderland, the gateway, the door, the crossroad,
The mouth of the cave, of the canal of the second birth,
The entrance to the labyrinth, the liminal interstice you've glimpsed
Between daylight and darkness, waking and sleeping.

She will test you beyond all imaginings of the tellers of tales.

When you face the monsters fashioned of yourself,
Of your every pettiness, failure, betrayal, cowardice,
You will wish it were only your flesh being torn asunder.
She will throw against you the whole phantasmagoria
Of shape shifters and demons, but all her glamour will not prevail.
For you will experience, as at a distance, the serial foes, the tricksters
And riddlers, the press of battle, the penultimate melee and discord,
The final spiraling downward toward the logos.

Even at the threshold, it is done.
That you stand ready is sufficient,
For the end is in the beginning.

In your veins flows the dark blood of the mother.

That Hecate/Phoebe hides her face but reminds you, seek her.
She is eternally present, at the core of being, even when unseen. Most when
unseen.
She is the center you seek, the culmination, the goal, of the hero's journey,
Of the birth into knowledge.

What treasure will you return to your undeserving fellows?
On your return, we shall carry you to the place of honor,
And we shall feast and drink your glory and shine by your borrowed light,
And when night falls, our children will listen, rapt, en-couraged,
Awe full, by the fire, under the maiden moon, to the tales you tell:
"Listen. In the gloaming, a dog was barking, a frog croaking."

SAPPHO SPEAKS ACROSS THE AGES
TO HER LOST LOVE

NB: Sapphic meter is a rhythmic and stanza form created by the poet Sappho of Lesbos (c. 630 – 570 BCE), from whose name and place of habitation, ofc, we get the words "lesbian" and "sapphic." A sibyl was an oracle to whom people went for answers to questions of great import. A bark is a ship.

Where art thou my lithesome disciple, she who
Broke me hard upon the fierce wheel of my own
Longing, cracked me wide until nothing could save
Me from this flooding?

Gone, I know, reborn in some other time, some
Other place. Thus spake the Sybil unto me:
"Gone she is. Where no bark can carry you.
There, You are no more." O!

Fine as figs and nectar of plums were your sweet
Kisses. None can these e'er replace, O thou, thou,
Thou of honeyed face, I am broken on you,
Broken and flooded.
Holy the flood is,
Pupil and teacher,
Holy the flood.

CECI N'EST PAS UN POÈME D'AMOUR

Perhaps I should begin as a mosaicist does,
Laying out stones of various colors,
Egyptian blue here,
Red ochre and lime white there,
In preparation for assembling them
Into something decorative and beautiful.
A bower.
It would be worth the trouble
If this brought you a moment's delight,
And you but once nodded and smiled.

I would feel myself amply repaid,
I tell myself.
And this is even partially true,
For there is what you and I both see into me
And what I would like to be,
And I strive for the latter. I do.

But where was I?
Oh yes, the mosaicist's method:
I might, for example, make a list:
Column 1: Midnight, second sight,
Earth-light (from that Exeter Book riddle),
Column 2: Moss and gravestones, lichen, loam,
Column 3: Your fingers tracing the scar
On the back of my hand as though it were
A fragment of palimpsest or khrēsmē
And you were capable of reading it
Because of your sensibility and learning,
Which--this is surprising in anyone--you actually have.

That might work.
But instead, I think I'll just plow ahead
And say plain what I meant to say,
When I started this,

In whatever words seem most fitting,
Forsaking the meter of the metronome and regular rhyme,
For because of Pound and H.D. and
Mr. Schimezzi
In 8th-grade English,
You'll glance at the layout of these thoughts
And think, "poem," anyway,
Or not "think," exactly, but rather recognize this
Without having to think about it,
And that may be sufficient to my purpose,
And fuck that anyway, that sorting things out so regularly
In accordance with cladistic taxonomy,
And the rules of classical harmony,
Luehdorfia japonica here,
Germans and fair maidens there,
Your many merits, ranged in couplets, quatrains,
Or an Alexandrine Homeric catalogue.

Maybe I should cut out that last part.
What do you think?
You're good at this,
And that part does seem a little long.
Even I am bored with it.
Which could be a problem.

And, of course, because this is a "poem,"
A "love poem," to be exact,
You have a right to expect
That certain standards will be upheld.
You have a right to certain expectations,
To expect, for example, that I won't mention
House Resolution 83.3,
Which I would never do, of course
(hee hee),
Except ironically.

That's fine. I'm left with enough to work with,

With monkeys in mango trees under the moon,
With the pattern of tiny elephants on the hem of that skirt you wore once
And the nape of your neck as you held your hair up
For me to hook for you the clasp on that string of lapis beads,
With your mind skittering across connections between
Grammars and glamour, witan and wit,
Like sunlight chasing ripples across an ocean.

So, here's the thing:
Clearly, it sounds as though what I'm trying to do here
Is what poets have done since forever.
That I'm casting about for those words, that art,
That will draw you into my bed, and
Would probably be willing to trot out all their arguments.
To say, for example, that time will undo
Your loveliness, temples to rubble and all that,
That you'd better, in the words of the great American poet Janice Joplin,
"Get it while you can,"
But I don't believe that, and neither do you;
I mean, let's get real:
We both know that you will go down as beautiful
As the day you were modeled in the mind of the One,
And rose from the sea,
Or was it from out of the flame of the hearth
Like that Naga princess in the Mahabharata?
Either is possible.

Perhaps I could rely on my charm,
My capacity to disarm,
But I have before me the example of Yeats
Who was truly among the greats
And would never have written a rhyme as lame as that.
He wrote the finest poetry
Of the whole damned 20th century,
Conjured Helen and Usna and Cathleen ni Houlihan
Back from the dead
For a woman who married, instead,
(However well Yeats did entreat her)

An Army lout who beat her,

And it gets worse.

I can recite for you, chapter and verse,
Raleigh's Reply to the Shepherd.

And so I say to myself,

Look, even if you, Jack with a pail,
Carried holy water down from Parnassus,
You would likely fail.

If that were what you were after,
The appropriate response would be laughter,
For when did that ever work,
You jerk?

HISTORY LESSON (ON THE *HINTERWELTLERN*)

“Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, Ye are Gods’?”

--John 10:34

Plato imagined he looked on beauty bare
When beholding in his mind the perfect square,
For no carpenter’s square under heaven could one find,
As perfect as the one he had in mind.

So perfection, he taught us, was never to be sought
In the foulness of a world so crudely wrought,
But only in a world of mind apart
From works and ways and poets’ lying art.

Perhaps it was his teacher’s termagant wife
Who taught them both to disdain the world and life,
With its laughter of children and song the cricket sings,
Clouds before the moon and mountain springs;

Compassion; lovers’ embraces; fairy rings;
The pert, pink ears of mice—those terrible things!
So Plato instructed the ages, "Here's the deal:
"You should know that the real is unreal, the unreal real."

But far away in Judea, a carpenter taught
His lowly disciples, "Salvation cannot be bought,
"But build it here You must, You certainly can,
"When G-d sends the promised re-Form-er, the Son of Man.

"To establish His Kingdom, His rightful, sovereign berth,
"A New Jerusalem, here on the good, green Earth."
And for this impertinent, good but impolitic, news
He was killed and mocked as a fitting "King of the Jews."

He’d likely been naught but a footnote but perchance

Barbarians on the Empire soon advanced
And the cult grew strong, guided by wicked men
Who had learned their Plato and thought, themselves, to win

Power by sorely corrupting the purest light
And making of this an instrument of might.
“The Kingdom,” they preached, “is neither present nor nigh,
“It’s in the sky: you win it when you die,

“But only if you serve as obedient tools
“Of the Church that über alles justly rules.
“We hold the key. But learn this lesson well:
“Deign to seek happiness here and you’ll go to hell.

“You cannot build heaven on Earth, so learn how to fear.
“It’s wrong to think worms can build so, can make one here,
“For the world and the body are evil, and no good can come
“Of wanting more here than meekly to succumb.”

And so the Church, its worth and girth to increase,
Made bloody war in the name of the Prince of Peace
And murdered its way through continents and millennia,
Not bothered the least by its clear, its rank schizophrenia.

But the natives they slaughtered died knowing, though worlds be undone,
That the world of the spirit and the world of the world are one.
It’s a truth that cannot be lost. New lovers see plain
That Plato was wrong, demented, perverse, insane.

The spirit is here, in you and me, in the sod,
And that lover beside you is one of the faces of God.

TSUKI (SHINOBI MOON)

I keep a safe distance from this,
But sometimes at night, especially in Autumn,
When clouds are roiling across the moon,
I remember that moonlight on her face,
Her breasts rising and falling with her breathing
As she slept, there in the still room,
The one by the harbor, our harbor,
The room with the window looking out
On the fishing boats bobbing, the stars dancing,
On the midnight waves.
Her sleeping face, her breast,
The moonlight,
And swiftly, silently, deadly,
The knife goes in.

NB: In Japanese, the word tsuki means both "moon" and "assassin"

MIDSUMMER, NO FAIRIES

Where have you gone, fairies of my childhood?
Have I grown too blustering and blundering,
Too puffed up with knowledge and opinions?
I seek you in the clearing of the wood
And there find only the luminescence
You have left behind, hanging in the thick
Midsummer's air. Is this, then,
What is left me? This ripeness, this
Completedness, this disclosedness,
In the clearing, of things in themselves,
Naked and heavy as flesh?

I seek you by the margins of the lake,
And there find dragonflies and damselflies,
And the silver bodies of mullet jumping,
Breaking free of one world into another,
Again and again, as though they would
Break free for good or die trying.
And these are wonders, surely, but
They but intensify the longing you left,
With your mark upon my body,
When you returned me to the cradle.
How could I see those and not be reminded
Of the shimmering of your wings
By moonlight as we danced?

I am wise to you.
This is what you do, is it not?
You return us, you leave us with the world
And the knowing that this richness beyond measure,
This clearing, for all its fullness, is not all,
Is not all at all, at all, at all.
It is a hard lesson, and I am, doubtless,
As slow a learner as the rest who try to parse it.

But where have you gone?
I would ask the trees, for those of their gossiping
Garrulous race would doubtless know,
And the wind is rising, and they are bending their heads,
One to another, on the opposite shore, and
Making a racket. Are they oblivious? Do they mock?
I cannot know, for I haven't their language.

Perhaps one could learn it, in time.
Perhaps if I sat here and listened long enough,
I could figure it out, for surely the San tongue
Sounds equally incomprehensible to the anthropologist,
Hearing it spoken, at first,
Within the clearing that is their world, in all its fullness,
With its ways of disclosing and of shutting out.

SAMHAIN

Listen.

Wind shakes the now-ravaged fields,
rattling the shocks.
Fall, we call it,
and not just because
of the leaves.

This is the bountiful time, yes,
but the wind that scatters those leaves
like rats from a cellar
in a war-torn land
reminds us that this word,
harvest, has two meanings.

Oh, tonight we shall eat well,
but let us not give way to gluttony,
for in this time we remember our mother
and all she has provided,
and the debt we owe in return,
to give no allegiance or assistance
to those who would despoil her,
to show toward all the tribes,
human and not, that generosity
she has shown to us.

And so we leave some fruit on the vine,
some grain on the stalk,
not only for the spirits who will roam,
hungry for remembrance, across the land,
on this night when the veil is thinnest--
leavings for the ancestors,
and for the poorest, the gleaners--
but also for the wee folk,

the mouse of the field,
and those most able tillers, the worm
and the fungus, our kin,
no less sacred to the mother
than we, for which of us would boast
so shamefully, "She loves us best"?

The year grows old.
The Lord of the Forest hath not
his youthful vigor,
but this, too, we honor,
for a baby, though precious,
is just a baby,
while a child holds the baby
within him or her,
and the youth the baby and child,
and the elders, all these.

So, tonight, we honor our eldritch eldest,
and they eat first,
and we leave a chair at the feast for our dead,
and listen for the old Lord's voice
in the wind, reminding us,
that we, too, will be harvested,
and enter again the round
of the wheel.

FOR A FRIEND ON HER BIRTHDAY

Hold this poem to your ear,
And you'll hear the sea.

But that's not all.
I've put silences between the stanzas,
Just for you,
For when you need them.

And secrets under the covers
Of the plain prose
That you alone may touch.

Go ahead. No one is looking.

Except God, of course,
And she, through you, through me,
Through fishes in that deep blue sea,
Has seen everything.

It occurs to me, writing this,
That I've yet to give you
Much to look at, Princessa,
Like trilobites and Groucho glasses,
Orchids, geishas, Peruvian pots,
Smoke signals, pagodas,
That I've totally forgotten to include
A plump yellow banana slug
The size of a mouse
On the mailbox,
In the rain,
At dawn.

But I have included in this next line
A plate of mango rice

And here, coffee from Columbia
Sweetened with coconut cream
And *dulce de leche*.

Too much? You might think so,
But taste it.

Because I've built it into a poem,
This cup will be like those
You've read about in myths and fables:
The most heroic of heavy drinking
Will not empty it.

You can come back and have a sip
Anytime you want.

I have this on the authority
Of Keats himself.

How cool is that?

It's like love.
The more you give of it,
The more you have.

IN MYSTERIA, A FRAGMENT

On a mountainside in North Carolina,
two monkeys, genera *Homo*,
species *sapiens* and *ignorans*,
sit on the bank of a lake at dawn.

They wear flip flops.
They drink reconstituted limeade from Nalgene bottles.
They watch mists play above the water's surface.

Vapors rise, swirl, dance toward one another, separate, combine again,
like smoke from a pipe,
like Djinn in the desert.

One monkey sees elemental spirits.
The other sees water molecules moving across a heat differential.

Truth be told, these monkeys are both a bit stoned.
She is still feeling the effects of the *Psilocybe semilanceata*,
but he is totally blinkered on 700 years of scientific impudence
born of figuring out how to make electronic can-openers,
as if everything—the universe, other people—were a can.

Not since Lucifer have the seven heavens seen such hubris.

He's impatient to go for a swim.
He has things to be and people to do.

This difference in the monkeys' theologies has her rethinking
the monkey dance they did together the night before,
that left them happily heavy in one another's arms
like twin fetuses in a womb.

If you don't get anything else out of this class,
at least you can carry away this practical tip:
Theological disputation before breakfast can ruin your sex life.

ON SEEING FOXY MISS MOXY'S RISQUÈ CABERET

A Poem in Sapphic Meter, for Madelyn Greco

Foxy's dancing tickles my slumb'ring fancy.
This is whence it all came to be, I tell you,
Atum's giggling building to cosmic laughter:
Ring in the welkin!

Birthing being, energy outward pulsing.
This is how the worlds came to be, this you, this
me, this every shimmering, wondrous thing, is
Atum still laughing.

EPITHALAMION

In our house, there will be laughter and music,
Warm kisses on cold nights,
And a fire burning low.

In our house, there will be jars
Of quince jelly and watermelon pickle,
Of garam marsala and crystallized ginger.

In our house, there will be zithers
And sitars and kalimbas and violas,
One of those big Mariachi bass guitars,
And a piano that is kept in tune.

And there will be bottles of soap bubbles
And big and little Buddhas,
And Ganesha,
Remover of obstacles.
And to Ganesha we shall make offerings
Of hashish and cupcakes (in case he gets the munchies),
Placing them reverently in front of his figure
On a well-thumbed copy
Of the Kama Sutra.

In our house, there will be trilobites
and Silly Putty
And comics from Germany
And Poland and the Ukraine,
And there will be a waffle iron from the 1920s
That looks like the spaceship in
The Day the Earth Stood Still.
And there will be Groucho glasses

and Peruvian pots and erotic orchids
And paintings by people who will be
Really famous artists
In the year 2056.

In our house, there will be books and books and books
In piles among the manuscripts
That I have written
By the light of you.

And those books will tell the whole
History of civilization,
Of all that has been thought and felt
And believed,
Of how apes came down from the trees
And struggled mightily against
Cold and famine and disease,
And traveled up the Nile from
Tanganyika all the way to the moon.

And it will feel as though all that history
Led to its culmination
In this, our house.

And I shall be true to you,
As a diamond remains diamond
Just because that is what it is.

In our house, there will be friends dropping by
To sing and drink wine and tell stories
And when they leave, they will feel oddly lighter,
Renewed, strangely alive,

And they will wonder what was in the drinks.

But it won't be the drinks, of course.
It will be the spirit that flowed from us
Into them, just because they were, for a time,
In our house.

And I shall cook for you, wild and wonderful,
And crazy stuff out of those little jars,
And when it's too wild and wonderful,
We'll order Chinese.

And the dog will have to move his butt over,
To make room for the holy sacrament
Of our lovemaking.

And sometimes, at night, I shall get up to
Go write something down because
There are characters walking around in my head
That just won't settle down and sleep,
And when I return to bed,
I shall see you, submerged, by moonlight,
And looking upon your sleeping face,
Know a completeness
That that is the end of being.

And there will be a coffee shop down the street
With the morning light streaming through the windows,
And angels salsa dancing in that light
And you'll say to the angels, "Can you stop that damned
Dancing long enough for me to get a cup of coffee,
For Christ's sake?"

And I'll watch how the wind kisses the lobes of your ears
As we walk hand in hand, back down the street
to our house.

And we shall grow old and wise and venerable
Like two tendrils of last summer's vines,
Twined around one another
In a field of autumn grasses.

And when the last day comes,
We shall be able to say,
That we have had all that was needed
To make a life.

And that's how it shall be
In our house.

THE PROGNOSIS FOR POETRY
IN THE AGE OF TAN IN A CAN

If I could speak

If I could speak in these lines

If I could speak in these lines in the old, high manner,

Austere and pure as a mountain spring

Before the days of polyvinal chloride,

If I could speke with the tungis of aungels,

If I could conjure King David, Orpheus, Taliesin, Oisin, or Shakespeare to speak for me,

If I could speak as even these never spoke,

Still, my voice would be as that of the shade of Willie Yeats, in a crowd of thousands at
a Maga rally,

Reciting in that one small human voice some ancient fragment—"Ich Am of Irlonde" or
"Westron Wind,"

Into the uncomprehending blare of rock music and lies from the main stage.

No Muse is equal to the news,

To the pee tape, to the Black Friday sale on smart speakers,

To the trailer for *Venom*, to Stormy and the Bunny

And Cheez Whiz now in a convenient aerosol spray.

How, exactly, is one to make poetry of such tatter?

How does one speak to such an age, in its language,

And call this poetry?

The rhythms from the drum machine, though crude and mechanical, are more
insistent, easier to remember,

Than were those danced around ancient campfires.

They are designed, in fact, scientifically, to persist in memory,

Like scars on the tissues of the brain,

Making it impossible even to hear

A melody in Chopin or Liszt.

If I could speak true in such an age, my voice would be that of one who has awakened
during surgery, paralyzed,

Who sees and hears and feels it all—

The surgeon's saw parting flesh and bone—

And screams and screams but cannot be heard,
Who looks, to the one taking her apart, as oblivious as a chump before Trump on a stump.

Oh, yes, I could make poems.
I could make this, for example.
But if a poem is spoken where no one hears it, is it spoken at all?

Suppose one with greater powers than I wrote a true poem today.
Would it be a ridiculous anachronism,
Like an Apple watch on the wrist of an extra playing a gladiator in Avengers 18?
It seems that way. It seems that a poet, today
Is like a moth that has flown through a door left open by a cook who stepped into the alley for a smoke,
A moth who has gotten treacle on a wing from the pear flambé
And is stuck and circling madly on the edge of a plate in the servers' window.
However much you might shout at the fellow at the Genius Station in the Apple Store,
There are some things that, once broken, cannot be fixed.
Does she know this, that moth?
That some broken things cannot be mended?

I think, sometimes, that poetry has had its run.
The greatest ever written are now as unknown
As the child who dies crossing the desert at the border of the United States of America.
All the poems? All my pretty ones?
Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?
What, all my pretty chickens and their dam
At one fell swoop?

But then, a child is born,
And her breathing, her inspiration and expiration,
Her beating heart, systole and diastole,
Synchronizes with the voice of a mother who remembers some lullaby her mother's
mother sang,
And I think of the monks at Skellig Michael,
In the times we are not now supposed to call the Dark Ages,
The monks in their stone hovels by the cruel North Sea,
Copying manuscripts by flickering candlelight,
With hands raw from the cold,
And holy, holy, holy,

Keeping learning alive
Until a better time.

BACK TO BASICS (NOTHING THAT IS IS NOTHING)

*“The way there, if you’ll let a guide direct you
Who has only at heart your getting lost. . . .” –Robert Frost*

Strip away your clothes. Good. Good start.

Now, your thoughts.
Your phenomenal perceptions.
And your bodily sensations.

This gets more difficult, but keep going.

Get COMPLETELY naked.

Start from there
From transparent being.

You will find it unstable,
Always throwing something up.
Don’t let this trouble “you.”

If successful, *you* will disappear entirely.

All things, matter, energy, space-time itself,
the physicists say
Is a quantum foam,
Bubbling up, becoming,
Disappearing, bubbling up again.

Nihilists, note: There is never noth. . . .

I AM AN IDIOT

OK. Yes.

I'm an idiot,
for I will rise
from my work
to watch raindrops
patter on a sidewalk
as though I'd never
seen them before,
as though these were
the first rain
on the first day
in freaking Eden.

I'm like the child
who never tires
of watching
Jack spring from the box,
who is surprised,
each time,
who squeals with delight,
each time,
as though
this were revelation
and he or she
hadn't seen this,
already,
a thousand times.

Being an idiot,
I sometimes think
I could make a religion of this,
of this staring stupidly
at the rain,
for certainly,
one could (and people have)
made religions of worse.
I think I could probably

gather about me
a whole troupe
of “spiritual wives”
and we could
watch the rain together,
which would be fun,
for sure,
for a time,
but being an idiot,
I lack the will
for that,
or, perhaps,
the low cunning.

This is why,
I suppose,
gurus are gurus,
and I, I,
am just another
idiot.

ON LEARNING THAT HOPKINS BURNED SOME OF HIS POETRY

The great historian of education (and generally great all-round person) Diane Ravitch has written that her favorite poem is one by Gerard Manly Hopkins. So, I wrote this for her, about Hopkins, in Hopkins's own style. The phrase noli me tangere, in the poem, is the Latin "touch me not," spoken to Mary Magdalene by the risen Jesus. The line also occurs in Sir Thomas Wyatt's sonnet "Whoso List to Hunt." And, importantly for this poem, touch me not is the name of a flower whose seed pods burst, scattering their seeds, when those pods are touched. Hopkins, a Jesuit priest and one of the greatest poets of his generation, worried, as Chaucer did, that his obsession with writing poetry verged on sinful self-obsession and sensuality. LOL.

If a fairy tale begins with a prohibition, you know it's going to be broken .

The Word was charged anew with the grandeur of Gerard Hopkins's bold bald conjugal rhythms that sprang so springingly sprung across the page and marveling mind like one of those flowers—*noli me tangere*—that blows then bursts raining, dappled, down such confettilike windfall seedpod images that one might drown in their festive falling, so scattering round about in lambent Monet-made lily-light as to make one wonder, bebrindled, seduced, fallen again, whether to win such a world were worth the fell first fall after all. Our first father's, mother's Eden lost to gain another. If this be sin, go and sin some more, beautiful brother.

PROSE POEMS

THE STUDENT OF BLISS

Lada considered the many options, the programs and catalogs of the various schools, those close to home, and those far away, and decided to become a student of bliss.

Bright girl, she could have taken most any course of study. Her parents weren't happy, of course, that she spent their hard-earned money on something so frivolous.

"There's no future in it," they insisted. "Look, you could be studying Home Economics, Unbridled Acquisitiveness, or Blind Obedience to the State."

But Lada was headstrong and would not be deterred. "Bliss," she penciled in, during her sophomore year, on the application to degree programs.

She was incorrigible.

I know what you are thinking, at least, what you are thinking if you were brought up on American movies: Her story doesn't end well.

Everyone knows that those who follow bliss end up addicted and overweight, dissipated, derelict, in the gutter or hospital or jail, broke and broken, battered and bitter, all blood and spittle, backaches and bile.

And so it could have been for Lada, had she followed the standard program of the four-year American colleges. You know the routine: the tailgate parties, fraternity parties, after the after party parties, the mandatory hey, babe, bae babe, do-you-dare and the little black dress.

Of course, various educational reformers, going back to Guatama and Lao-tze, Al Ghazali and the Baal Shem Tov, Miester Eckhart and Teresa of Avila had argued that one should, while not neglecting them, move quickly through such elementary studies to get to the real thing, but it takes time for such critiques to effect changes in the standard curriculum, so no harm done. Good enough for government work and government schools, some say.

But Lada wanted not only the Minor, the Associates' Degree, the B.A. in Bliss. She was after the PhD., and that's why she transferred, in her junior year, to the Alternative Program, where she finally got what she was looking for—classes in the iridescence of pigeons' wings; in the smell of hot sidewalks at dusk; in the sensitivities of earlobes, which are so various (who knew?); in whirling, of course; in the languages of birds; in waking dreaming; in stillness at the center; in liquid repose; in the disrobing of fruits; in the monkey dance.

She's now an acknowledged master, so much so that a great tycoon came to her, one who had EVERYTHING: the hedge fund Senior Partnership, the prized collection of local, state, and federal administrative, legislative, and judicial action figures and wind-up toys. He wanted the one thing he didn't have, to be her student. In truth, he was smitten.

In her presence, who wouldn't be?

She told him what Yeshua told the rich young man who wanted to become His disciple: Go sell everything and give it to the poor. Then come back to me, for we have work to do.

He was smitten, but stupid. He declined.

MIDSUMMER (FROM THE NOVEL *PAGAN MOON*)

Being the minister's son's prophetic dream.

Midsummer. Night. Clouds roiling past a gibbous moon. The air heavy with honeysuckle and jasmine and pheromones. Vines twisting darkly up the bodies of trees. Mushrooms heaving skyward the weighty black loam. Bats, owls, and great luna moths beating their wings against the moist, warm darkness. The earth itself beating, beating the fecund frenzy of the mystery dance, ecstatic, heedless. Trees pulsing at the root, their black bodies erect against the sky, puffing their intricate plumage as the bullfrog does his chest or the peacock his tail. Earth, water, and air full to exploding, cacophonous, dissonant, frenzied, insistent, an orchestra tuning—the toads piccolo; cicadas, katydids, coleoptera, the plucked viols; the bullfrogs' *basso profundo*. All saying: Choose me. Choose me. Choose me me me.

And deep in the woods, secret, the young broods sleeping and Jody with her skirt at her waist, her hair matted with sweat and semen, and her salt sea running down.

THE CHARGE OF THE GODDESS

This is a recasting of the Charge of the Goddess from the Gardnerian liturgy, which was purportedly an accurate transcription of that employed in the ritual Sabbats practiced by one "Old Dorothy" Clutterbuck, a priestess of the Old Religion. Modern scholarship has revealed that Gardner lied about his source and created a pastiche from a variety of sources, some ancient, and some both contemporary to his time and irredeemably silly. All this goes to show that even a knave and buffoon like Gardner can inadvertently, in the end, do some good in the world. I have long felt that Gardner's version needed a good threshing to separate the authentic sustenance from the chaff.

“Before my images, in ancient times, the youth of the Indus prostrated themselves, but I reject all worship and prostration except what you freely offer to yourself and to your fellow creatures, my children. At my altars, in ancient times, the youth of Sparta made sacrifice, but I am older by far, and reject all sacrifice and propitiation except what you freely give to yourself and to your fellow creatures, my children. Children of Sophia and Eros, I have made you to bow down to no prince, no potentate, no power of the earth or the heavens. You are gods and goddesses in my image, your bodies fashioned from stardust, your spirits coeval with me, and if you kneel, it is to be only in reverence and awe before the rest of creation, not in fear or in supplication.

“Once in the month, and better it be when the moon is full, then shall you assemble in some secret place, and adore the spirits within yourselves and your fellow creatures. There shall you assemble, you who reject all fakeries, fabrications, foretellings, and fantasies of sorcerers, fakirs, inquisitors, prophets, preachers, and priests, and celebrate the root, stem, vine, leaf, bud, and flower of that which is. Know that no eternal heaven nor hell, being born in time of the fantasies of men, endures as

do the transient bud of spring or cloud before the moon or wave upon the sea, which return and return again, in never-ending rebirth and transformation.

“And you shall be free from slavery; and as a sign that you are free, you shall be, in your rites, clad as you were born; and you shall dance, sing, feast and drink, make music and love, all in praise of the creation, generative and generated, creative and created. For mine is the ecstasy of the spirit, and mine also is joy on earth; for there is no law but that of nature: If it causes no harm, do as you will. Love thy fellow beings, know that what you give for good or ill comes back to you threefold, and seek your fulfillment, knowing that this cup can never be filled. Honor the ephemeral spirits of the world, but seek within this sole limit of causing no harm the extremities of ecstasy and mirth and wonder. Drink deeply from the cup of the wine of life, knowing that each moment is eternal. I am the Mother of all living. Give and receive pleasure and compassion in my name, for all acts of pleasure and compassion are my rituals, and my love is poured out upon the earth.

“I am the beauty of the green earth and of the white moon upon the waters. I am the spirit that brings forth life, ever, and especially in this season of rebirth. Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honor and humility, mirth and reverence within you. If you wish to know me, understand this Mystery: that which you seek, if you find it not within yourself, you will never find it. For I have always been with you and am that which is attained at the end of desire and at its beginning, ever revolving, worlds without end. I am the Lady and Goddess, and so are you.”

SHIVA AT THE DMV

*Wherein are intimated certain mysteries of the calculus
generally skipped over in introductory courses. . . .*

The Main Chapel of the Living Word. An ancient man on the stage,
but who? A teacher. The chapel dark. He is reading out a lesson.
Slowly, deliberately:

“You are on fire. Always. Moses and the bush that burns
but is not consumed. Heraclitus: The world is a fire,
forever kindled and forever going out. The Mahabharata:
The world is continually destroyed and continually
remade, but your perceptions are so slow that you see it
as continuous. It’s a matter of thresholds.

“Unfold her. Touch her with the gentleness of the first
snowflake on the late summer grasses in South Dakota.
Almost not a touch at all, but there enough in the
quicken perception of the first forbidden moment (This
is not, of course, forbidden). Her loins arch toward your
touch, increasing its pressure. There. It doesn’t matter
that you are up for it. Of course you are. Can you forget
your dick for a moment? Are you worthy? Her body will
tell you if you listen with your body. There. There. Yes.
More. No. Stop. Slowly. Slowly. Yes. Yes. If you listen with
your body, hers will tell you how to take her to the
moment of the instantaneous infinite.

“Zeno showed long ago that by ordinary means you
cannot go from the one place to the other. You must
learn the calculus of the body and then forget your
learning in the being there. And if you do that, her slow
burning will kindle a fire that will consume her. Let Shiva,
destroyer of worlds, be your guide. The world is
continually being destroyed and remade. You must be
subtle enough to feel it. She has been looking for that
one, that man, that woman, who will consume her in

Shiva's holy fire, for the body knows, even if she does not,
that when she finds that, she will be reborn each day.

"Why is that woman smiling behind the counter at the
Department of Motor Vehicles? Because she has Shiva in
the sack."

The minister's son awakens. He is naked and shivering in
bed, but not from cold. The room seems underwater. On
the shelves beside his window, a Bible, his calculus book
from high school, a copy of *An Ecumenical Guide to the
Major World Religions*, a piece of paper with Her number
on it, she who is sending him these dreams. In the frame
of the window, clouds racing the moon. The distant,
piercing cry of a sand hill crane. "God help me," he says,
to himself, alone.

CENTCOM DXES K'S KPIS

Being lesson on muddying the waters to make them look deep. . . .

*“Management consultants steal your watch and then tell you what time it is.” –
Martin Kihn*

“Let me speak, for a moment, from a 50,000-Foot-Perspective,” said T, laser pointer in one hand, projector remote in the other, “While Six Sigma DMAIC and DMADV deployment has certainly Bootstrapped the Operational Efficiencies of the Today’s Armed Services, you can’t just throw a New Paradigm Over the Wall and expect people to Drink from the Firehose. A NOC is more than infrastructure and architecture. That’s the Low-Hanging Fruit. Maybe this is what Porras and Collins call a Big, Hairy, Audacious Goal, but I say Best-of-Breed is the only way to go. You’ve got to Implement Cascaded Key Performance Indicators—KPIs—to ensure Stakeholder Buy-in and Alignment and Accountability, not only Along your Verticals but Along your Horizontals as well because what we’re after, here, I’m sure you will agree, is the creation of a COE—a Center of Excellence employing Best Practices. And what do I mean by Best Practices? Why, Scorecarding, of course—that goes without saying—but also De-Siloing, which, as I’m sure you know, is the whole point of Cross-Functional QFD, uh, Quality Functional Deployment, not to mention Matrix Management.”

T surveyed the blank, uncomprehending faces of his audience. He had them just where he wanted them. “And those KPIs—those keys to Alignment—have to be Dashboarded Real-Time and not just floated up into the Adminisphere whenever some Prairie-Dogging GM gets some good news and wants the boss to Bobblehead his bonus. And that’s the Value Proposition of Security-Heightened Information Technologies: we act as Change Agents, not only Architecting the Roadmaps and the Enterprise-Enablers, the Communications Plans and Transformation Plans, but also Facilitating and Fast Tracking the Action Items over the Event Horizon. That’s our Value Add, and if it’s not your Core Competency, and of course it isn’t, that’s the whole point, right, of Privatization? of letting you stick to the business of containing the terrorists? If it’s not your Core Competency, it *is* ours, and, that’s what we Bring to the Table.

“I know what you’re thinking: of course, there’s always Diminishing Returns on any Hype Curve, but getting the Analytics right isn’t just another Consultancy

fad—it's the Real Deal, it's what you have to do in Today's Business Environment, with its Discontinuities and Black Swans. We've Ridden the Experience Curve on this one. We've done the Knowledge Capture and have the Thought Leaders and the Bandwidth to Knock This Out of the Park—to create a Blue Ocean, if you will. In short, we serve as your Envisioneers. We begin with Capturing Asks, the Voice of the Business and the Voice of the Customer, to Validate the Requirements, and then we Baseline and Benchmark; Map the As Is and To Be; do the Want/Got, the Trending, and the Gap Analyses; establish the Risk Management Parameters with a Failure Means and Modes Analysis. But we don't stop there, with Shelfware. We actually do the Knowledge Transfer, the Mindshare and Cross-Fertilization, if you will, making sure that your Implementation Team has the Face Time with our PMPs and SMEs to Source it all properly and Queue up the Pipeline so you end up with a Plug-and-Play, Turnkey Solution. And we can Leverage our firm's Strategic Relationships all along the Value Chain to add further value, with only a modest Incremental appropriation, both to Increase Throughput and Reduce Cycle Time from design to Go Live. And to make sure this is not just some sort of Fire Drill, we Health Check the whole process through the final Toll Gate with our Proprietary Activity-Based Costing."

T took a deep breath and changed to the next slide. "And if the cost is an issue, let me remind you of the projected ROI. I mean, if the numbers are big at the top of the page, they're a whole lot bigger at the bottom, and remember that, in the long run, Quality Is Free and pays for itself. And to sweeten the kitty, if this is done properly, you should be able to Demass and Delayer some of those Horizontals I was talking about earlier, so everybody goes home happy. So, the question comes down to whether you need to Run This up the Flagpole or whether can we sign the Incremental S.O.W. right here and now. Or maybe, Colonel Frank, you'd like to Take that part of the discussion Offline."

The colonel sat back in his chair and thought a bit. After a long while, he smiled. "Son," he said, "that was some presentation."

"Thank you, Sir," said T, "but this was not my presentation alone. It has the full force of Security-Heightened Information Technologies behind it."

"No. No. Take credit where credit is due. As I said, that was some presentation. I, for one, have found your remarks enlightening. And in return, I have something to share with you. As I'm sure you know, CENTCOM is a multi-service

force, a unified command running operations all over the Middle East, Central Asia, and East Africa. We've got people from every service working here—a band of brothers running the war effort around the globe. I'm Army, myself—cavalry, if you can believe that—came up in the Horse Cavalry Detachment of the U. S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division—we still keep that detachment in operation, for ceremonial purposes, mind you. One thing about the kind of training I got in the 1st Cavalry—I've been around horses long enough to know horseshit when I stumble across it.”

And that is how T came to find himself temporarily unemployed. But, as they say, you can't keep a good man down, and T wasn't about to remain unremunerated. T was, after all, like so many up and coming young executives, Coin Operated.

MY EXPERIENCE IN CORPORATE AMERICA

I think it's time I got a real job, I said to myself. After all, I can still commune with dead saints and the energy bodies of trees on my own time.

So, I cast enfeebled, pallid, emasculated reductions of my being onto various streams of the Internet, and one of these washed up like the baby Moses on the shores of a company that, according to its website, did really important stuff without which the moral fiber of the country would suppurate, and the economies of nations would implode like aged massive stars.

The company sent agents to waterboard anyone who had ever had contact with me, extracted some of my precious body fluids for analysis, asked me to come back for some fine magnetic resonant imaging of the pathways between my pons and thalamus, which have something to do with dreaming, and hired me anyway. The last of twenty-six interviews for the “position” (“Let me show you to your rectangle”) was with the executive vice president for investor obfuscation, who earned \$950,000 per year, plus bonus and stock options, and had his own private collection of state and federal political action figures and bobbleheads.

On my second day on the job, some nice fellows from the IT department came by to shave a spot near my brainstem and swab it with antiseptic, a supply of which they left on my credenza. Thereafter, every morning, I would myself swab and sterilize. Then a tentacle would come out of the ceiling and embed itself into my brain and suck out my life force, leaving me just enough intelligence and spirit to sustain such necessary nonwork functions as showering and grooming, going to the bathroom, making coffee, and, of course, driving to work.

A week in, I stopped by the office of my supervisor to ask her about the claims by certain radicals (reporters for *CNN*) that the plastic tubing we claimed to produce for the purpose of feeding

premature babies was actually being sold for administering corrosive chemicals and cosmetics to the eyes of rabbits. Showing up at her office without having first sent a meeting request turned out to be a *faux pas*, a breach of corporate etiquette, for I interrupted her in the process of eating her young. She wasn't happy but told me that she wasn't going to have my flesh scraped from my bones with currycombs this time.

A month in, the company was purchased by an equity firm. I rather liked seeing the new managers ride in with their shiny armor and crisp white livery and shields emblazoned with images of the true cross, for at least the octopi were inoperable while they swapped them out for succubae, which they considered more effective and reliable. There was a meeting. The new president had inherited ten zillion dollars from his grandfather, who, as it turned out, was a founding partner in the equity firm that had bought us! Funny how these coincidences occur! Such synchronicity! He brought to the job a lot of experience smoking hashish on the beach in Goa, India, and dancing in rave clubs in Ibiza with the other jet-setting sons and daughters of the illumined ones, as well as two weeks' experience as an intern at Morgan Stanley BOA Chase Merrill Citi Deutsche UBS Goldman Credit Suisse, the firm that resulted from the mergers that occurred during the financial crisis of 2008–09. The new guy inspired confidence. He said, "You'll like the succubae. When they liquefy your insides, it feels all warm and cozy." Two weeks later, however, we got the memo that all employees with over three years' experience would be desiccated, ground into powder, and fed to new hires. Our president had read an article in the *Sloan Management Review* that reported on an experiment with flatworms (Platyhelminthes). Researchers had taught these cute but cannibalistic and cross-eyed worms to turn left in mazes by administering shocks if they turned right. Then, they ground up the worms and fed them to worms that had not been taught. The untaught worms turned left, which suggested that the learning of trained worms had been transferred to them. The president explained that feeding experienced employees to

new hires was purely a financial decision, and one that he did not take lightly. A company exists, he admonished us, to return a profit to its stockholders, and as the chief officer of the company, he had a fiduciary responsibility to do that by whatever means might achieve that end, and obviously new hires were cheaper than vested workers, who tended to be fatter and require larger cubicles anyway.

As it happened, I was not to be there to witness all the desiccating and grinding of the workers first hand, for when the end of my probationary period came, my supervisor indicated on my review that I was having ideas and showing initiative, either one of which was grounds for dismissal as per section K-21-468-10, subparagraph 289a of the Employee Handbook and Cheery Motivational Guide. In the days that followed, the color returned to my cheeks and I achieved reentry to the reel world like Kore returning from Hades, and for months thereafter, everything I encountered seemed, for some reason, finely articulated and luminous.

JESUS AND I

So, Jesus and I were taking a road trip through North Carolina. We made a wrong turn and got onto this country lane that dead-ended into a slaughterhouse—this big garagelike door, open, and the screams of the pigs coming out of it. Some of the workers were wearing ear muffs because of the screams, and they all had on rubber galoshes. Jesus took one look and put the souls of the men into the pigs and the souls of the pigs into the men. You could see the souls, like this yellow smoke, moving from one group to the other. I suppose he did that just for effect, as in the movies. And I said, “Jesus, you can’t do that!” and he said, “It’s just for a minute,” and then like Circe turned them all into pigs and everything else, for miles around, into forested swamp with lots of places to root and wallow.

“Paradise,” he said.

I was sleeping, but something woke me up. It was Jesus. I walked through to the living room, and sure enough, he was up, sitting on our sofa in his boxers in the dark, smoking a Gauloise and laughing to himself. I said, “What’s so funny?”

He said, “I just sent Donald Trump a dream. He was a six-year-old from Honduras, and he had been walking for days and days through the desert with his mother, and he was thirsty and hungry and burned and bug-bitten, and his feet were throbbing, and she was crying, and he woke up screaming so loud you could hear it all the way to Melania’s room, though nothing surprises her anymore.”

“So how did you get the Gauloises?” I asked. “I thought they couldn’t sell those in the United States anymore.”

"I have connections," he said.

"Why Gauloises?" I asked.

"My body is a temple," he said.

Once we were shooting hoops at the Y and I asked him, "Jesus, since you have all these like, powers or whatever, why don't you just fix everything? Cancer, hunger, cracked iPhone screens, Trump's brain?"

He gave me this you-expect-me-to-do-everything-for-you look, but then he softened, because that's how he is, and said, "Leibnitz wrote a book about this-- on the problem of evil. Funny."

"What's funny?" He had a weird sense of humor. I told him this, too. Often.

"Well, as you know," he said, "Leibnitz co-discovered Calculus. But he totally missed, in his book, that souls are infinite and that any amount of suffering, divided by infinity, is effectively zero."

"Over my head," I said.

"Yeah," he said. "It's a design flaw."

OCCASIONAL, LIGHT, AND
POLITICAL VERSE

TO DON THE CON, REPUGNICAN, WITH APOLOGIES TO
EBB

How do I loathe thee? Let me count the ways.
I loathe thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach. I cannot stand the sight
Of thee. Disdain thou makest me embrace.
I loathe thee to the level of every day's
Most fervent rage, by sun and monitor light.
I loathe thy morals, thy contempt for every right.
I loathe thy vanity, seeking constant praise.
I loathe thee with the passion one might choose
To heap on vandals, and with my childhood's faith
That our decency, under thy boot, we shall not lose.
So may we curse thee with every waking breath
Thy objectification of all, thy conman's ruse,
Thy instincts not of a man but of a wasp on Meth.

STOPPING BY SCHOOL ON A DISRUPTIVE AFTERNOON

after decades of test-driven education “reform”

Whose schools these are, I think I know.
His house is near Seattle though.
He will not see me stopping here
to watch what kids now undergo.

My better angels think it queer
to see a place so void of cheer
what with the tests and data chats,
the data walls with children’s stats.

Where are the joys of yesterday—
when kids would draw and sing and play?
The only sound I hear’s defeat
and pencils on the bubble sheets.

Disrupters say, unflappable,
“We’re building Human Capital!”
Such word goes out from their think tanks,
as they their profits build and bank.

“Music, stories, art, and play
won’t teach Prole children to obey
with servile, certain, grateful grace
and know their rightful, lowly place.”

The fog is heavy, dark and deep.
Where thinking tanks, Deformers creep
and from our children childhood steal
and grind them underneath the wheel.

Postscript:

Disruption of the Commonweal
is that in which Deformers deal
that they might thereby crises fake
as cover whereby they might take
(the smiling villains!) take and take
and take and take and take and take.

TRUMP CARD

The fact that you even have to say
That Black Lives Matter
And the fact that you do—you do have to say it.
The fact that Putin and Trump

FACT CHECK

The fact that you even have to say
That Black Lives Matter
And the fact that you do—you do have to say it.
The fact that Putin and Trump
The fact that if you tell people
it's about their freedom,
it's about their jobs,
it's about those Socialists
wanting to steal your hamburgers
The fact that Jesus on a plate
holding an AR-15 at the fireworks concession
The fact that Alex Jones
The fact that I'm so good at facing facts
they should name a recovery center after me
or a firing squad in Arkansas or North Korea
The fact that men in three-cornered hats told other men
that it was about THEIR freedom,
that it was about THEIR equality,
when it was really about (their, shh) not paying (their, shh) taxes
The fact that it doesn't have to be same as the old boss
The fact that the Mystic Massacre
The fact that the Fort Pillow Massacre
The fact that age-defying cream
The fact that skin-lightening cream
The fact that you could go on all day like that
The fact that you learned the facts of life
but don't even want to know the facts of death
The fact that if you are brown in America
someone else's *de jure*
is your *de facto*
And the fact that that's a fact
The fact that if you're poor,
fact finding is easy because
there's always a fact of the day
and if you're not,

then you are an accessory
before, during, and after the fact
The fact that all markets look pretty free
if you're rich and spending some poor person's labor
The fact that everybody wants their Mama,
and no one wants to admit that,
is two facts
The fact that 27,375 days
The fact that Jimmy Carter said
he had sinned against Rosalynn in his mind,
which was so JC of him,
I could have kissed him on the peanut.

RUDOLPH, DON'S BROWN-NOSED REIGN DEAR

(to the tune of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer")

Rudolph the Ghouliani
had a very brown, brown nose,
squandered his former goodwill,
stroking Trump on TV shows.

All of the other Trumpties
used to laugh and call him names.
Even those abject toadies
thought him crooked and insane.

Then one Foggy Bottom eve,
Trumpty called to say,
"Rude one with your nose so brown,
won't you take Joe Biden down?"

What happened then's sheer folly:
thanks to lows the two men reached,
history will most remember that
Trumpty Dumpty was impeached.

SCHOOL IS A CUCUMBER

for Andrew Calhoun

'E 'ad some brines about 'im,
A salty lad, and fine,
His wit would tickle a pickle,
Or so it is said in Strine.

ROAD TRIP

*To the Tune of "Normandy," from the musical Once Upon a Mattress
[Dialogue to cue song:]*

RUDE-OAF THE BROWN-NOSED REIGN DEAR: Wow. 148 million I've lost this racist harassment of election workers thing big league. And I'm gonna lose the voting machine thing. Same for the, you know, the sexual harassment thing. I had to sell my apartment in the city. Soon, I'll be living on the street. You gotta help me, Donald!

DON THE CON: Don't worry, Rudy old pal. You know that the Queen Bee wouldn't leave her best lady in waiting in distress and not come to the rescue.

RUDE-OAF: But, actually, Don, you would, you know.

DON THE CON: True (beat), but just hold on. Listen for a minute. I have an idea.
DON (sings while doing his weird little waddle dance with his fists up):

Sochi in Russia is fine and fair.
So Sochi in Russia's where we'll go.
I can show you a beach
Where the models all go.
And I know how to reach
A man who knows a man who knows

RUDE: Tsar Vladimir the Short?

DON: You betcha.

DON (continues singing):
An overbuilt dacha,
A real showy place
With hookers and fixtures made of gold.
This time of year, the grift I hear
Is easy, clear, and free
In old Sochi!

TRUMPANZEE RHAPSODY

If Trump Sang Bohemian Rhapsody, with apologies to the late, great Freddie Mercury

Is this the real life?
Is this just fantasy?
Caught in my web of lies,
There's no escape from me.

Don't open your eyes,
Don't doubt my lies. Please see. . . .
Poor little rich boy, I'm just so needy.
Very dumb, very slow,
Little, next to nothing, know.
Everything I do blows. Nothing really matters
But me,
But me.

Mama, I dye my hair like yours.
And I comb it 'cross my head,
Want approval though you're dead.
Wanted you to say, "You're the greatest, son,"
Though you are gone, that drives me to this day.

Mama, ooo, ooo, ooo, oo,
You and Daddy made me cry, so
I'm needy yesterday, today, tomorrow.
Carry on, carry on. Nothing really matters.

I figured that my time had come,
I had run through my last dime,
Thought I'd probably do some time.
Then Putin came, and rescued me,
Left that history all behind, and that's the truth.

Mama, ooo ooo ooo, orange makeup shines.
Some people wish I'd never been born at all.

I see a little silhouette of a man,
Scaramucci, Scaramucci, will you do the Fandango?

I need enlightening.
I'm very, very frightening.
(Galileo) Galileo.
Oh who was Galileo?
Science I don't know.
But Trump is Magnifico!

Poor little rich boy. Nobody loves me.
Kids into cages. A misbegotten family
Demon seed I've spawned to carry on
My monstrosity.

Vlad has the pee tape. He will never let me go!
MyGodMammon! He will not let you go! (Let me go!)
MyGodMammon! Vlad don't let that show! (Let me go!)
MyGodMammon! He will not let you go! (Let me go!)
Got you by the balls oh!
No, no, no, no, no, no, no

Handler mia, handler mia (handler mia, let me go!)

Comrade Vlad has a devil put aside for me, for me, for me!

So I think I can screw the whole country and still be idolized.
Cause my Trumpeteers cannot tell the bitter truth from lies.
O-baby, blame it on Obama, baby.
Just gotta be
Reelected you see
This year.

(Ooooooh, oooh yeah, oooh yeah)

No one really matters.
Anyone can see.
No one really matters
No one really matters.
But me.

O DONNIE BOY I

For Moscow's Asset Governing America (MAGA), aka Vladimir's Agent Orange, to the tune of "Danny Boy"

O Donnie Boy,
your handler Putin's calling,
extending thanks
for the Ukraine delay.
He wants to say,
impeachment's surely galling,
but still the tape
won't see the light of day.

But come ye back
to Moscow, if you're worried.
We're here to help
you grab 'em at the polls,
and if you lose,
you won't see jail, I promise.
O Donnie boy,
just fly on home
to Sochi Bay.

O DONNIE BOY II

Aka, Goodbye Orange Clown Man, to the tune of "O Danny Boy"

O Donnie boy, your cuckoo coup has faltered.
Time runs away, like dye down Rudy's cheek.
What's done is done. The vote count can't be altered.
You'll soon be jailed. Your prospects sure look bleak.

Will you come back, when Biden's term is over?
Will Princess Sparkle run then in your stead?
Will your scam businesses roll then in clover?
Well those cloud castles, Donnie boy, are made of lead.

THE SIX LIVES OF DONALD THE WURST

For Moscow's Asset Governing America (MAGA), aka Vladimir's Agent Orange, to the tune of "Danny Boy"

Six wives had he, the Eighth King Henry.

Trump had but three, we're told, but when he

was twixt and between those he made a great show of,

perhaps he swallowed some four we don't know of.

for as you most certainly know or have guessed,

King Donald Doolittle must always be best.

PATRIOTIC NOISE

Submission pursuant to an application for the position of speechwriter for Donald Trump, Josh Hawley, Ted Cruz, Greg Abbott, or Ron DeSantis

Murika, land of the
tis of thee,
by jingo by golly
by jingoism,
by the dawn's eerie
night
from above,
by crackie,
by cracker,
by crackle!
freedumb de dumb de dumb
Another village saved from thinking!
A tear in the eye as the flag goes by
saved by the Liberty Bell!
well,
mission accomplished,
O land that beats true
for that ole black 'n' blue,
for me and you
and all true
merkins
ole black Joe
stuck a feather in his
tweedle dumb,
tweedle dee,
so stand your ground,
women for Trump,
while these savings last,
yes, they stole the erection,
but I'll be home by Christmas,
there's a war on that
funded by Soros and the teacher's unions,
indoctrinating our kids with their critical race theory
that leaves dishes in the sink and

turns children transgender
and lord knows what they are doing
with those Jewish space lasers
am I rite?
they dont want you to have hamburgers!
hamburgers!
But your donation is a weapon aimed at the heart of Antifa,
protecting our statues, our Truth Social, our Just Us and \$1.99 hamburgers!
They wanna take your cows.
Well, I say, no more,
for the business of America is hamburgers
and American Cheese food product
all the livelong day, that
gem of the
dancing with the,
hey there with the,
you there with the,
stars in your eyes,
and stripes on your back cause
it's really the whites who are
discriminated against and
nothing was given to you, rite?
you earned it
you rock, you roll!
you gitter dun
you could grow up to be the next
Glorious Leader Who Shines More Orange Than Does the Sun,
in the sweet buy and bye [call now]
some of my best friends are,
bye, bye blackbird:
buy now, for deals like this won't last forever,
and see you in Church on Sunday
for your tax-deductible donation
thank you, Jesus,
Proud to be a merkin,
'cause least I know I'm
freebird
freedumb
freebase
freefall,

but definitely not freegan,
born free, as free as
THE WIND BLOWS,
by golly,
by gee,
by Jim Dandy doodle dandy,
Onward!

Where our fathers fruited plain.

Everybody sing!

TO THE HONORABLE ELIZABETH A. WARREN

*You are what you pretend to be,
so be careful what you pretend to be.*
—Kurt Vonnegut

It was a story
passed down in her family,
how many years ago
some opposed the marriage
of their son to the woman
who was part Indian,
and the story resonated with her,
became part of her identity,
something of which she was
justly proud,
this defiance of injustice
and bloody clannishness.
This too, is a heritage,
more real,
than any imagined
bloodline.

We are not just flesh.
We are also
the stories we tell ourselves
about ourselves,
what we chose to remember,
some of it, even, true,
for memory, EVERY time,
is a reconstruction,
a confabulation,
a just-so story,
and so fallible
as to be definitive
of being human.

"Find yourself,"
the hippies used to say,

as though you were a lost sock
waiting to be found.
"You are not a lost sock,"
I say to people:

The self is self-created.
Authenticity is truth
to what you would be:
The Gods themselves
are dreams of what we could be
if we were true enough
to our vision
of what we might be.

Shame upon any
who would reject
on so shallow a basis
as imagined "race"
one who would call him
brother.

AUTOCORRECT POEMS

Inspired by the Emails of La Divina Krystalina y Ninja K

Spurned Bread

sourdough bread → spurned bread

The bread I left her

In the cornflower basket?

It goes uneaten.

My Kitchen, My Rules

making biscuits tomorrow → making biscuits timorous

Bow down and lick my boots

Ye galley slaves,

For I am queen of the kitchen!

Lo, even the biscuits are timorous.

Symptomology and Diagnosis

Shudder → Shutter

When people shudder, they shutter,

And from behind that redoubt,

They kill.

You might easily pity them

If they weren't such cowardly assholes.

Oh, but that's redundant.

OMG! SOMETHING IS NOT PURRFECT HERE!!!

Writing children's stories → Worrying children's stories

The candy-minded graduates of Vassar,
back from their trust-funded sabbaticals
playing the hang drum on the beach in Goa
and dancing in clubs in Ibiza
with other pedicured sons and daughters
of the Illumined Ones at CitiGoldmanBoozHamilton,
take the jobs their Daddies arranged for them
at Simon and Schuster and set about
worrying children's books into cuteness.

They red-pencil the razors in the Mermaid's slippers,
nix the Beauty and Beast series,
obviously some kind of sick medieval rape fantasy.
No Greek God Eros, of course.

Valentine's Day cherubs are so much less,
well, troubling. Don't want to worry the children,
they say, slipping their Tickle Me Pink iPhones into
their Aubergine Coach bags, and heading to lunch
at the Russian Tea Room, where they share the horrors
of that children's story from Mali about Sundiata,
the lion king, who actually sent his sister

*to sleep with the sorcerer Suomo
and get him drunk on palm wine
and cut the hair that was the source
of his power. They called that a children's story,
those savage griots, and told it for centuries!
Thank God for Disneymogrification,
they say. Isn't Simba so much more just, like, adorable
and still true to, you know, the spirit of the thing?
And Santa—well, the white-bearded Laplander shamans
would ride their raindeer-pulled sleighs
out over the snow to gather red and white-spotted
hallucinogenic mushrooms, Amanita muscaria,
into a bag flung over the shoulders of the red coats
they wore, in honor and imitation of their entheogen God.
They would feed the 'shrooms to the raindeer—
Can you believe that?—and then drink the raindeer piss
and see visions. Just eating the 'shrooms, of course,
would have killed them. Sick. Sick. Sick. Thank God for
Coca-cola and its ads featuring Jolly Old Saint Nick,
Cleansed of all that, starting back in the 1920s.*

They pay the bill with Daddy's black Master Card,
And head back to their Ministry of Truth and Purity,
not worrying, at all, their so trendily coifed heads,

about creating a world of worry-free childhood,
where pearls of imagination and wisdom
never form around specks of grit.

THE CORING OF THE SIX HUNDRED

With apologies to Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Row on row, row on row, row on row stationed
Sick at their monitors sat the six hundred.
“You may now type your Username,” said the test proctor.
Set up for failure sat the six hundred.

“Enter your password key! Mercy upon you!
“During the testing, no one can help you.”
Someone had blundered. The unspoken truth.
But *theirs was not to make reply,*
Theirs was not to reason why,
Theirs was but to do or die,
Theirs was but to try and cry.
Set up for failure sat the six hundred.

Text to the right of them, complex, out of context,
Bubbles in front of them, plausible answers,
Tricky and tortured,
Boldly they bubbled and well
Though smack in the mouth of hell
Sat the six hundred.

This is what reading means, now that Gates/Pearson
Has reified testing far beyond reason.
Pearson not persons. Plutocrats plundering.
Taxpayer dollars spent to abuse. The children are used.
They bubble and squirm to reveal their stack ranking
And never again will know joy in learning,
Never again humane joy in reading
And writing, no never again,
Not the six hundred.

Text to the right of them
Complex, out of context,
Bubbles in front of them,
Plausible answers,
Tricky and tortured,
Boldly they bubbled and well.
Gritfully slogging through hell
Sat the six hundred.

When shall their innocence, innate curiosity,
Joy in their learning, ever return?
This never shall be. Theirs is to gritfully
Show the obedience proper for proles,
Their preordained role in the New Feudal Order.
Standardized children, Standardized minds.
Common, not great, though sufficient to serve
The ends of the state. Lost to themselves
And the fruits of their labors.

Honor this children's crusade.
Honor the price they paid.
Remember when they played.
Our once-young six hundred.

SELECTED POEMS | Bob Shepherd

ESSAYS ON POETRY, STORYTELLING,
AND LITERARY CRITICISM

ON READING AND WRITING POEMS

Five thoughts, tonight, about reading and writing poetry

How Poetry Means

Perhaps the most important lesson that I received, in college, about reading poetry occurred on a day when, in a class on nineteenth-century American poets, I commented that unlike just about everyone else, I wasn't a fan of Edgar Allan Poe's poetry—that it seemed to me phony through and through. The guy made significant innovations in the short story. He invented BOTH the detective story and the madness/supernatural ambiguity on which so much horror and science fiction rides, but his poetry, mostly, seems to me contrived and false. The professor said, "Hmm. That's a problem, your not believing him, because you can't read a poem well without being willing to take the author's trip." And then he shoved everything off his desk and lay back on it and closed his eyes and recited "Annabel Lee" from memory. I still cling obstinately to my opinion about Poe. But I've never forgotten that lesson.

One thing I tried to teach my students about reading in general and, in particular, about reading poetry, is that *they have to enter into it*—they have to go into that world of the poem in their imaginations, and then they have an experience there, and that experience has significance of some kind, and that's what *meaning* means in poetry. It's the significance to the reader of that experience that he or she had. That doesn't mean that any reading will do. If the poem is well-constructed, that experience will be quite specific, and the reader will be led inexorably to have something very like the experience and to gain from it something very like the significance that the writer intended. The whole thing is an exercise in bridging an ontological gap--my mind and experiences and understandings over here, yours over there. Poetry is a form of communication that tries—sometimes successfully! —to do the impossible. It's the heavy-duty artillery for doing that job.

This is why it's so awful that some English teachers approach poems by reading them aloud and then asking, "What does this mean?" as though poets were these perverse people who hide their true meanings and as though the meaning of a poem is some blithering generality (the answer to that English teacher's

question: e.g., Life is transitory. It's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved. Some such generalized bullshit).

There's an old joke that asks, "How many Vietnam veterans does it take to change a lightbulb?" Answer: "You wouldn't know because you weren't there, man!" The reader who turns a poem into a blithering generality hasn't taken the poet's trip, hasn't had that vicarious experience, hasn't learned things from the experience that mattered, that had significance, that were meaningful in that sense. He or she hasn't been there, man.

So, a poem is the very opposite, at its core, of a vehicle for expression of a general principle, though one can glean general principles from good poems, as from life. A good poem is concrete and precise. Every added detail further delimits the precision, the particularity, of the world of the poem. To be specific about this, to say that Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is about anguish at the loss of faith is true enough, but if that's it—if that's its sole meaning to you—then you weren't really there, man. The moment that Arnold describes so precisely, has to be experienced—that fellow, standing at the window, looking at the receding tide, which no longer speaks but is a freaking thing roaring mechanically, who tries to have this conversation with the woman in the room who isn't really interested, whom he fears does not love him, is experiencing loss on so many levels—of faith, of hope, of belief in the progress of the world, of love. And if you've gone there, if you've *inhabited him* as you read the poem, and if you've experienced his PARTICULAR experience, then it's not one that you'll readily forget. It's wrenching, and heart-breaking. And it will be quite meaningful to you.

Great poetic writing renders with a few incredibly deft strokes that entire world into which the reader enters. A few words are enough to bring it fully, hauntingly, breathtakingly into being in the mind of the reader. This is what Derek Walcott was talking about in the opening of his "Map of the New World: 1. Archipelagoes":

At the end of this sentence, rain will begin.
At the rain's edge, a sail.

Poof. Rain. A sail. A world. He's talking about the freaking ancient MAGIC by

which, via words, one brings a world into being. It's what's left for Homer to do now that Helen's hair is a grey cloud and Troy is an ashpit in a drizzle.

So, poems mean in a way that treatises don't. And this is why authenticity is so important in poetry—why that's what separates the good from the bad, "Dover Beach" from the typical high-school versifying of adolescent angst and Valentines. If the poem doesn't create an authentic world, you can't go into it. There's no coherent there to go into.

There has to be a there there. I have a young friend, Brooke Baker Belk, who is a very great poet. There's a there there in her work, and this separates it from almost everything else being written now.

Having Something to Say

I love Shelley. And I think that he's far more important than most people realize. He wrote in "A Defense of Poetry" that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," and ironically, that's true of him today. HE FREAKING INVENTED the language that we use to talk about our emotions, and every stupid pop song in the 20th and 21st century owes an enormous debt to the language he used. No Shelley, no "Sounds of Silence" or "Stairway to Heaven" or "Wake Me up When September Ends." But the writers of those songs and the consumers of them typically did not and do not have a clue that this is so. And he did it so, so, so much better, ofc, than rock star lyricists typically do, Lord knows. By all the gods, he could use words well. And what a spirit he had! He was probably murdered, you know, by British intelligence because of his rabble-rousing for Irish independence (this was the proximate and determinative cause, but he was also loathed by conservatives for being an aristocrat who hated aristocracy, for espousing republicanism and the end of monarchy, for being a model to young people, they thought, of atheism and sexual license).

But there's an aspect to his work that really troubles me: He had a lot of really bad ideas. Platonism, determinism. Stupid, wrong, dead-end ideas. Stuff from his time. He died young. Too young, damn it, for he was brilliant. He wrote sooooo well, and he was a scholar. At the age of 24, he could read ancient Greek as you read Google News. Perhaps in time he would have developed some good ideas (aside from his political ones—We're still catching up to his

version of the Declaration of the Rights of Man). Poetry, like other writing, is supposed to communicate. It renders significant *experiences*, and so they have an earned quality, like actual life. And in the greatest poetry, what is earned is intellectually, spiritually, morally, or in some other way significant. It matters. It's fresh and new and insightful. And so, it helps, a lot, for anyone who wishes to write poetry to have something to say. The very best poems always do. "A Tree Telling of Orpheus." "Dover Beach." "Credences of Summer." "Directive." "Mr. Flood's Party." "Lucinda Matlock." "Among School Children." "Easter 1916." Almost anything by Blake or Rumi. These poems provide deeply significant experiences that teach, about life, about other people. It's worth taking their authors' trips. So, that's my issue with Shelley. He was too young to have much interesting to say, though he could say it so well.

The Prognosis for Poetry

The blood in your veins has the same composition and proportion of minerals as do the salt seas. This is an ancient memory, preserved in us, of the amniotic oceans. And that blood washes us with the same rhythms, of course, diastole and systole, that we hear on the shore--those eternal iambs or trochees, also found in our inspiration and expiration, as root words in languages around the world attest. So this stuff is deep in us, and the prognosis for poetry, even in a profane age, is good.

All our endeavour or wit cannot so much as reach to represent the nest of the least birdlet, its contexture, beautie, profit and use, no nor the web of a seely spider." --Michel de Montaigne, "Of the Caniballes," in the beautiful English translation by John Florio published in 1603. See <https://archive.org/details/essaysofmontaign02montuoft>

Texts and Contexts

This Elizabethan word *contexture*, btw, is one that we need to resurrect. It means "integration done so palpably, as by weaving, as to create a useful whole." So, it presupposes organization or arrangement of ideas, in a text, according to their precisely appropriate interrelations. Texts exist in contexts. (It makes a difference whether "We need to tie up the loose ends here" is spoken by Tony Soprano or a macramé instructor.) Words, phrases, pauses, sentences, paragraphs, and other elements of discourse likewise work, or don't, in context, and either serve, or don't, as essential constituents of a workable whole--a cup that will hold water.

Making It New

Advice to the person who describes himself as "a budding poet." If it doesn't have stems and meristems, don't describe it as "budding." If you describe using cliches the very activity by which you are fashioning your own identity, this doesn't bode well for your having something compelling to say. Poetry is real work, and there is no set of Logo blocks for doing it. (There are, however, some excellent Snap-on Tools. Learn the use of those.)

NOTES TOWARD ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS “WHERE DO POETRY AND LANGUAGE COME FROM?”

“The most exciting phrase to hear in science,” wrote Isaac Asimov, “is not ‘Eureka!’ but ‘That’s funny!’” Well, in the middle of the last century, anthropologists discovered something funny (in the sense of surprising): so-called “primitive” hunter-gatherers like the Aborigines of Arnhem Land, in Northern Australia, and the !Kung San of the Kalahari, in Southern Africa, spent only about 20-something hours a week providing for themselves—foraging and hunting—and the rest of their time hanging out. (Interestingly, chimpanzee troupes, who share a lot of DNA with us and are more closely tied to their natural environments than we Westerners are, spend about 27 percent of their time foraging and the rest in sleeping, rest, socializing, and play.) In other words, it seems quite likely that ancient hunter-gatherers weren’t like the property-owning kinsmen Thoreau talks about:

How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and woodlot!

Thoreau’s pal Emerson put it this way: “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind.”

But it wasn’t always so. Life came to be that way with the emergence of settlement agriculture and the city-state.

Ohiye S’a, aka Charles Eastman, was a Santee Dakota healer who wrote *The Soul of the Indian*, about the religion of his people before the coming of the White Man. In a moving passage in his 1913 book, he explains to white readers why the Indian was not poor, despite not having a lot of material possessions:

His religion forbade the accumulation of wealth and the enjoyment of luxury. To him . . . the love of possession has appeared a snare, and the burdens of a complex society a source of needless peril and temptation. Furthermore, it was the rule of his life to share the fruits of his skill and success with his less fortunate brothers. Thus he kept his spirit free.

It seems reasonable to assume that many of our ancient ancestors kept things simple and had a lot of time on their hands. What did they do with this time? Well, among the very earliest human artifacts that we have are body paints, cave paintings, carved figurines, drums, flutes, pipes, and lyres. The oldest dildo we've unearthed dates to 30,000 years ago, and we've found a double dildo almost as old.

Oh, and they danced. And they used hallucinogens and narcotics in splendid variety, and they created art and sacred spaces to encode their experiences (See *The Mind in the Cave*, by D. Lewis-Williams; *Inside the Neolithic Mind*, by D. Lewis-Williams and D. Pearce; *The White Goddess*, by Robert Graves; *Food of the Gods*, by Terence McKenna; and *The Road to Eleusis*, by R. Gordon Wasson, Carl Ruck, and Albert Hoffman.)

And they made poetry.

In every culture, around the globe, the earliest linguistic materials we have—stuff that survived in oral traditions long enough to be eventually carved in stone or bone or written on papyrus or bark—is not instrumental or utilitarian in nature—not instructions for building a dwelling or irrigating a field, but poems. And what were these like? Well, they are charms and riddles and jokes and songs of praise of heroes and gods, and they typically have about them an elevated, transported, ecstatic quality—as though the speaker were possessed, entranced, inhabited by a god speaking through him or her. This was what language in its earliest instantiations did. In every language, the word for spirit and wind is the same. And the word for inspiration.

Moderns look at the elaborate nest built by the bower bird, and they concoct a mechanical explanation: these are the result of a genetic mutation that led some ancient male bower bird to place a bright stone in the nest, which attracted a mate, which led to more male-power bower birds with that gene, which led to elaboration through competition. Blah blah blah. They imagine, stupidly, that speaking of the male FIGURING OUT that the female TOOK PLEASURE in such decorations is ANTHROPROMORPHIZING. Darwin knew better. He wrote a wonderful big book called *The Expression of Emotion in Humans and Animals* stressing the emotional continuity between us and the

rest of animal creation. But our ANTHROPOCENTRIZING scientists still don't seem, many of them, to have gotten the memo.

In his great book *Pleasurable Kingdom*, Jonathan Balcolombe describes crows who slide, over and over, for the sheer joy of it, down slanted rooftops; elephants who tramp for miles to feast on rotten fruits in order to become happily drunken; and chimpanzees who sit in a circle and pass around a type of cockroach to suck on—one that secretes a hallucinogenic substance.

Birds dance. Chimps pass a roach around. Our closest wild relatives, Bonobos, spend almost all their time, very happily, in physical play and sex with other Bonobos of both genders. Our earliest ancestors, in ecstatic transport, danced and sang. (Chimps, btw, will stand transfixed and then begin to dance ecstatically on first noticing a coming storm; Mircea Eliade, the great scholar of world religion, attributed its origin to just such experiences of wonder.)

The masters of the New Feudal Order here in the good old USA don't want us spending much time doing stuff like that. No ecstatic rain-dancing for you!!! They want you and me to spend our time producing and consuming and piling on debt, ever more abundantly, so that THEY can spend THEIR time doing stuff like that.

Thus the Puritanism of American culture. There's an old joke that's much to the point: Why do Baptists disapprove of sex before marriage? Answer: They're afraid it will lead to dancing.

ON SILENCES IN POETRY

A few years ago, a friend of mine, the singer/songwriter Kat Eggleston, was visiting. She asked my son, a guitarist, what he was working on. His answer (He was 16): “I’m working on the silences between notes. Those are important, too.” My friend was quite impressed, as she should have been.

Silences are important in poetry. One strives for minimalism—for saying just enough to render, deftly, in a few strokes, a world into which a reader can enter and have an experience that will then be significant in a particular way. The minimalism is not an end in itself but a means. The words are supposed to be powerful enough to become transparent. The reader is supposed to be transported, like the person in the cinema or the reader of a novel who forgets that he or she is watching or reading. This works because the mind is a narrative-spinning machine that fills in gaps, automatically, when we perceive, when we dream, when we call up memories, and when it does this, the person feels as though he or she owns it, and it reverberates like a bell, and that’s what’s supposed to happen when a person reads a poem.

So, economy is important. However, and here’s a BIG caveat: It’s also really important that enough be said. T.S. Eliot, master that he was, did generations of poets in English a disservice by being such a master of ellipsis. I say “a disservice” because copy cats of Eliot became copycat killers of poetry by following his lead too far. Longfellow and Wordsworth and Byron and Tennyson were among the best-selling authors of their times. A young woman once wrote to Wordsworth asking why he didn’t try his hand at one of the new German romance novels that were all the rage. His answer: Poetry has a much bigger audience.

Fast forward to today. Poets are now published, if they are published at all, in editions of 500 copies, mostly bought by their friends and their mothers and, in some cases, by libraries. When Randall Jarrell accepted the National Book Award for poetry, he carefully folded the check and put it into his shirt pocket and said, “If I wrote prose, mostly, I wouldn’t have to be so careful about this.”

A lot of what happened, there, is that poetry became so elliptical that most people don’t want to have anything to do with it. And they sat through endless

English classes in which teachers approached poems as meaning hunts, asking, “What does the poet mean by this?” as though poets were these perverse people who hid their meanings and seemed to have little interest in, say, communicating.

The same thing happened with jazz. It used to be THE most popular musical medium in the US and in Europe. Then along came Byrd and Trane, and they were amazing. But Hard Bop went over the heads of most in the audience, who simply couldn't follow them there. This also happened with serious classical music. Along came Schoenberg and Weber and Atonality and other abstract, avant-garde movements like Conceptualism and Minimalism, and audiences were left behind. The people who filled the concert halls to hear Hayden and Mozart and Beethoven and Chopin and Debussy and Liszt vanished. Poof!

The silences are important, the reverberations between the words in a poem. In these spaces, the world of the poem is created by those automatic mechanisms in the brain. But this has to be doable by a reasonably attentive reader, and it takes a lot of skill to figure out how where just enough becomes too little. Add to this issue obscure allusion, and you've got a bigger issue. Eliot at least provided footnotes to *The Waste Land*, even if he did so as a matter of lucky accident because the American publisher needed more to fill out the volume.

Too many poets, since Eliot, have given us muddy water that, they believe, looks deep, to rephrase, a bit, Nietzsche's justly famous formulation.

ON OBSCURITY IN POETRY

It's interesting how many "great thinkers" of the twentieth century wrote prose that was almost (or at times completely) unreadable. I've plowed valiantly through a lot of these people's work--Heidegger and Sartre, for example--and found in them, too often, a pose of profundity. When there is an idea in there, it turns out to be fairly simple and explainable in straightforward language, OR it turns out to be simply wrong, often, in the two cases I just mentioned, pathologically so.

It's one thing for an intellectual's work to be challenging because the ideas are new and unsettling; because he or she has chosen from a vast vocabulary, sometimes a technical one, sometimes an etymologically informed one, *le mot juste*; or because, from a vast knowledge he or she has pulled the perfect example or allusion (outside reference), though it be an obscure one. It's quite another for someone simply, in Nietzsche's words, to "muddy the waters to make them look deep." The former is forgivable and even, in a teacher, necessary--an attempt to reward the careful reader with something he or she didn't know or hadn't thought about before. But the latter ought to be a source of embarrassment, like having one's browsing history read out in church.

When the poet Randall Jarrell was invited to give a talk on "Obscurity in Modern Poetry," he reports that he thought, great; I've "suffered from this obscurity all my life." Jarrell was making a joke--a play on two of the word's meanings--"difficulty" and "unfamiliarity," both derived, like much of language, from an earlier concrete meaning (Latin, *obscurus*, "dark").

Obscurity in some contemporary poetry comes from people's borrowing and using, badly, a couple techniques from T. S. Eliot--obscure allusion and ellipsis (making a leap from one thing to some other, connected thing, but leaving to the reader the work of making the connection). Eliot at least supplied, sometimes, footnotes (even if he did so only to fill out the volume of the printed edition of *The Waste Land*).

In other contemporary poetry, obscurity comes from the would-be poet's having wrongly concluded, on the model of a someone like E.E. Cummings, that a bit of writing becomes a poem, as opposed to prose, when one has tossed out

not only meter, end-rhyme, and stanza form but any obligation to spelling, grammar, punctuation, word spacing, or sense. Certainly, there has been, over the past sixty or so years, in addition to the usual adolescent emoting that is sometimes referred to as poetry, a lot of work of this kind--free verse at its worst. It's been enough to throw most people off any taste for poetry, as I am sickened by the very thought of eating mussels, having gotten violently ill, once, from contaminated ones I ate in a restaurant in Chicago.

Let me be clear about this: Poems have the same rules as other language does, and if you break one of them--one of those unspoken contracts between you and the reader--you need to have done so for a damned good reason. Language, after all, is supposed to communicate. If it doesn't, then the transaction hasn't gone through. It has failed. Risk that, as a writer, at your peril. Poetry is language used MORE CAREFULLY, not less.

So what kinds of obscurity ARE acceptable in poems? Well, there are the kinds mentioned above--the use of the rare but perfect word, the use of the obscure but perfect allusion. To take an example from Elder James Olsen's wonderful book on Dylan Thomas, when Thomas writes of the "twelve triangles of the cherub wind," he's referring to old maps that featured drawings of cherubs on them, blowing the winds, and thus to the various directions. Once you know that, the sense becomes clear, and it's powerful because it is connected, emotionally, to one's knowledge of and feelings about winds and old maps and cherubs.

A couple other kinds of legitimate obscurity are

compression (packing a lot into a short space and requiring the reader be attentive and to do some unpacking). So, when Robert Frost writes, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep," the punctuation matters. The woods' loveliness consists in their darkness and deepness in this poem about a death wish, about that sense that sometimes overcomes folks who have trudged long through snow, that they want just to give up and go numb.

originality of conception (saying something that people haven't typically thought and requiring the reader to grapple with a new idea). So, when Emerson puts into the mouth of the god Brahman the words "O thou, meek

lover of the Good, find me and turn thy back on heaven," he means to shock us into grappling with the notions that a) perhaps everything, good AND ill, is God, and b) perhaps the spirit world is not in some far-off heaven but right here, that the world of the spirit and the world of, well, the world, are not separate places after all, but identical, two ideas he got from the Katha and Chandogya Upanishads that are quite foreign to Christians and thus often difficult for them to make any sense of.

One form that compression in poetry takes is the use of figures, such as metaphors and similes and alliteration and rhyme and more exotic forms like zeugma and litotes and what Kenneth Burke calls augmentation or diminution (expanding or contracting, in successive words, the distances between repeated sounds, as in "one right **D**amn **M**ad **D**a**M**oiselle." So, to give a very simple example, there's an excellent poem by Gavin Ewart in which an elderly, sometimes impotent husband watches, from bed, his young wife taking a call from what is likely to be her lover. "Domestic as custard / she talked," he writes. The use of this figure is abundantly justified. Custard is a comfort food, associated with childhood and innocence and, in the time when Ewart was writing, with wives making something special for the family. And custard is of the same color and warmth as is the wife's body, naked, for she has just hopped up from bed, and all these associations resonate powerfully, cruelly in the poem, much of which is given over to description of her.

Here's the thing: If you use a figure, it needs to have that sort of resonance. Figurative language requires something of the reader, and you must give something back in return. You must make it worth his or her while.

Poetry is the oldest form of imaginative composition. In every language around the world, go back far enough, far, far before the birth of prose, and you find poetry, an oral form, recited or chanted in prayers, in dances, around campfires, while working the crops. It's first and foremost a means of communicating—often of communicating what can't be communicated by any other means except through transporting the reader, via incantatory magic, to that world of the poem where he or she can have a powerful, significant, and in that sense meaningful, experience. And with so important a task at hand, the writer of poetry has a duty to the reader not to be obscure for the hell of it.

The reading audience, today, has pretty much divorced itself from poetry. Why? Well, like all people who eventually ask for a divorce, it's tired of being asked to give but not getting enough in return. Those who would be poets should remember that. Poetry places more and greater, not fewer and lesser, demands on the writer than does prose.

WHAT MAKES HUMANS HUMAN?

Little, today, is as it was.

Anatomically modern humans have existed for about 200,000 years, but only since the end of the eighteenth century has artificial lighting been widely used. Gas lamps were introduced in European cities about that time, and electric lights came into use only in the twentieth century.

In other words, for most of human history, when night fell, it fell hard. Things got really, really dark,

and people gathered under the stars, which they could actually see, in those days before nighttime light pollution,

and under those stars, they told stories.

In EVERY culture around the globe, storytelling, in the form of narrative poetry, existed LONG before the invention of writing. We know this because the earliest manuscripts that we have from every culture record stories that were already ancient when they were finally written down. One of the earliest texts in English is that of the poem *Beowulf*. It reworks and retells, in a much distorted manner, much, much older stories—ones that predate the emergence of English as a distinct language. Stith Thompson, the great folklorist, did the literary world an enormous favor by compiling a massive index, today known as the Arne-Thompson Index, of motifs of ancient folktales worldwide. Name a story motif—three wishes, talking animals, the grateful dead, cruel stepsisters, golden apples, dragons, the fairy or demon lover, the instrument that plays itself --and you will find that the motif has an ancient pedigree and was already spread about the world long before historical times.

English is a Germanic language. All ancient Germanic societies had official storytellers whose job it was to entertain people in those days before modern entertainments like television and movies and the Internet and drones with laser-guided Hellfire missiles. In ancient Denmark, the storyteller was called a *skaald*. In Anglo-Saxon England, the storyteller was a *scop* (pronounced like MnE “shop”). The *scop* accompanied his stories on the Anglo-Saxon harp, a kind of lyre.

Of course, the telling of stories wasn't the only entertainment around campfires. In most cultures, people danced and chanted and sang as well, and sometimes stories were told by the dancers or singers or chanters. All this was part of acting out the stories. (Want to know where the Christian devil, with his red body and horns, comes

from? Well, in ancient Europe, people worshiped an Earth Mother and her consort, a Lord of the Forest, and they told stories of the hunt. When they acted these out around campfires, they held up to their heads animal horns, or branches in the shape of horns, and that's how they pictured their Lord of the Forest, as a therianthrope, red from the campfire, with horns. When the Christians spread North across Europe, they made the god of the Old Religion into The Adversary. Grendel's mother, the monster from the bog in Beowulf, is a demonized version, in a Christian story, of the ancient Anglo-Saxon fertility goddess Nerthus, to whom sacrifices were made by binding people, cutting their throats, and throwing them into a bog. You can see an ancient bas relief of the Lord of the Forest, btw, on the Gundestrup cauldron dating from 150 to 1 BCE. See the accompanying illustration.)

But where does this storytelling urge among humans come from, and why is it universal? Storytelling takes energy. And it doesn't produce tangible results. It doesn't mend bones or build houses or plant crops. So, why would it survive and be found among every people on Earth from the earliest times onward?

Contemporary cognitive scientists have learned that storytelling is an essential, built-in part of the human psyche, involved in every aspect of our lives, including our dreams, memories, and beliefs about ourselves and the world. Storytelling turns out to be one of the fundamental ways in which our brains are organized to make sense of our experience. Only in very recent years have we come to understand this. We are ESSENTIALLY storytelling creatures, in the Aristotelian sense of essentially. That is, it's our storytelling that defines us. If that sounds like an overstatement, attend to what I am about to tell you. It's amazing, and it may make you rethink a LOT of what you think you know.

At the back of each of your eyes are retinas containing rods and cones. These take in visual information from your environment. In each retina, there is a place where the optic nerve breaks through it. This is the nerve that carries visual signals to your brain. Because of this interruption of the retinas, there is a blind spot in each where NO INFORMATION AT ALL IS AVAILABLE. If what you saw was based on what signals actually hit your retina at a given moment, you would have two big black spots in your field of vision. Instead, you see a continuous visual field. Why? Because your brain automatically fills in the missing information for you, based on what was there when your eye saccaded over it a bit earlier. In other words, your brain makes up a story about what's there. Spend some time studying optical illusions, and you will learn that this is only one example of many ways in which you don't see the world as it is but, rather, as the story concocted by your brain says it is.

This sort of filling in of missing pieces also happens with our memories. Scientists have discovered that at any given moment, people attend to at most about seven bits of information from their immediate environment. There's a well-known limitation of short-term memory to about seven items, give or take two, and that's why telephone numbers are seven digits long. So, at any given moment, you are attending to only about seven items from, potentially, billions in your environment. When you remember an event, your brain FILLS IN WHAT YOU WERE NOT ATTENDING TO AT THE TIME based on general information you've gathered, on its predispositions, and on general beliefs that you have about the world. In short, based on very partial information, your brain makes up and tells you a STORY about that past time, and that is what you "see" in memory in your "mind's eye."

So, people tend to have a LOT of false memories because the brain CONFABULATES—it makes up a complete, whole story about what was PROBABLY the case and presents that whole memory to you, with the gaps filled in, for your conscious inspection. In short, memory is very, very, very faulty and is based upon the storytelling functions of the brain!!!! (And what are we except our memories? I am that boy in the Dr. Dentons, in my memory, sitting before the TV with the rabbit ears; I am that teenager in the car at the Drive-in with the girl whom I never thought in a million years would actually go out with me. But I'm getting ahead of myself.)

You can also see this storytelling function of the brain at work in dreaming. Years ago, I had a dream that I was flying into the island of Cuba on a little prop plane. Through the window, I could see the island below the plane. It looked like a big, white sheet cake, floating in an emerald sea. Next to me on the airplane sat a big, red orangutan smoking a cigar.

Weird, huh? So why did I have that dream? Well, in the days preceding the dream I had read a newspaper story about Fidel Castro, the leader of Cuba, being ill; I had flown on a small prop plane; I had attended a wedding where there was a big, white sheet cake; I had been to the zoo with my grandson, where we saw an orangutan; and I had played golf with some friends, and we had smoked cigars.

The neural circuits in my brain that had recorded these bits and pieces were firing randomly in my sleeping brain, and the part of the brain that does storytelling was working hard, trying to piece these random fragments together into a coherent, unified story. That's the most plausible current explanation of why most dreams occur. The storytelling parts of the brain are responding to random inputs and tying them together—making sense of this random input by making a plausible story of them. This

is akin to the process, pareidolia, that leads people see angels in cloud formations and pictures of Jesus on their toast.

So, those are three important reasons why the brain is set up as a storytelling device. Storytelling allows us to see a complete visual field; creates for us, from incomplete data, coherent memories; and ties together random neural firings in our brains to into the wholes that we call dreams.

But that's not all that storytelling does for us. Storytelling about the future allows us to look ahead—for example, to determine what another creature is going to do. We often play scenarios in our minds that involve possible futures. What will she say if I ask her to the prom? What will the boss say if I ask for a raise? How will that go down? In other words, storytelling provides us with a THEORY OF MIND for predicting others' behavior.

Stories also help people to connect to one another. When we tell others a story, we literally attune to them. We actually get "on the same wavelengths." Uri Hasson, a neuroscientist at Princeton, recorded the brainwaves of people during rest and while listening to a story. During rest, their waves were all over the place. While listening to the same story, even at different times and places, those people had brainwaves that were in synch.

Storytelling also provides a mechanism for exploring and attempting to understand others generally. Our basic situation in life is that your mind is over there and mine is over here. We're different, and we have to try to figure each other out—to have a theory of other people's minds. By telling myself a story about you, I can attempt to bridge that ontological gap. Unfortunately, the stories we tell ourselves about others tend to be fairly unidimensional. You are simply this or that. I, on the other hand, am an international man of mystery. This is a tendency we need to guard against.

We also tell stories in order to influence others' behavior--to get them to adopt the story we're telling as their own. This is how advertising works, for example. The advertiser gets you to believe a story about how you will be sexier or smarter or prettier or more successful or of higher status if you just buy the product with the new, fresh lemony scent. And it's not just advertisers who do this. Donald Trump sold working class Americans a fiction about how he could strike deals that would make America great again because he was such a great businessman, one who started with nothing and made billions. The coach tells a story in which her team envisions itself as the winners of the Big Game. The woo-er tells the woo-ee the story of the great life they will have together ("Come live with me and be my love/And we shall all the

pleasures prove"). And so on. Successful cult leaders, coaches, lovers, entrepreneurs, attorneys, politicians, religious leaders, marketers, etc., all share this in common: they know that persuasion is storytelling. The best of them also understand that the most successful stories, in the long run, are ones that are true, even if they are fictional.

When we tell stories, we spin possible futures—we try things on, hypothetically. And that helps us to develop ideas about who we want to be and what we want to do. Gee, if I travel down that road, I may end up in this better place.

And that observation leads to one final, supremely important function of storytelling: Who you are—your very SELF—is a story that you tell yourself about yourself and your history and your relations to others—a story with you as the main character. The stories you tell yourself about yourself become the person you are. The word person, by the way, comes from the Latin persona, for a mask worn by an actor in the Roman theatre.

So, our very idea of ourselves, of our own personal identity, is dependent upon this storytelling capacity of the human brain, which takes place, for the most part, automatically. There is even a new form of psychotherapy called cognitive narrative therapy that is all about teaching people to tell themselves more life-enhancing, affirmative stories about themselves, about who they are.

Telling yourself the right kinds of stories about yourself and others can unlock your creative potential, improve your relationships, and help you to self create—to be the person you want to be.

So, to recapitulate, storytelling . . .

helps us to fill in the gaps so that we have coherent memories,

ties together random firings in the brain into coherent dreams,

enables us to sort and make sense of past experience,

gives us theories of what others think and how they will behave,

enables us to influence others' behavior,

enables us to try on various futures, and

helps us to form a personal identity, a sense of who we are.

Kinda important, all that!

Storytelling, in fact, is key to being human. It's our defining characteristic. It's deeply embedded in our brains. It runs through every aspect of our lives. It makes us who we are.

It's no wonder then, that people throughout history have told stories. People are made to construct stories—plausible and engaging accounts of things—the way a stapler is made to staple and a hammer is made to hammer. We are Homo relator, man the storyteller.

(BTW, the root *man, meaning “human being” in general, without a specific gender reference, is ancient. It goes all the way back to Proto-Indo-European, but there's still good reason, today, to seek out gender-neutral alternatives, when possible, of course.)

APPROACHES TO LITERARY CRITICISM

There are many ways in and out of works of literature. Here are a few of the most widely espoused. This is by no means a complete list, but it covers many of the most historically influential approaches.

Agonistic Criticism Criticism that focuses on the anxieties of influence (how writers react against prevailing, previous-generation work and, especially, against overly strong influences on what they perceive to be the cultural Zeitgeist). So, for example, the critic might examine how Milton reacted against Homer and Virgil, Christianizing the epic. (Representative critic[s]: Harold Bloom)

Anti-interpretive Criticism Criticism that emphasizes the sensual, surface features of and/or the imaginative experience had when reading a work of literature and that eschews translation of that work into pat “meanings.” (Representative critic[s]: Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”)

Archetypal Criticism Criticism that interprets a text by focusing on its use of recurring myths and archetypes. (Representative critic[s]: Northrup Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*)

Author’s Intention What an author meant to communicate in his or her work; the author’s intended meaning. Some critics hold that the purpose of reading is to recover the author’s intention, just as the purpose of writing is to carry out an intention. However, the seemingly reasonable claims that the meaning of a work is the author’s intention and that the purpose of criticism is to recover the author’s intention are both controversial. Some critics, for example, doubt that recovery of intended meaning is possible or desirable, but believe, rather, that meaning lies in the text itself (New Criticism) or in the reader’s responses to the text (Reader-Response Criticism). See *New Criticism* and *Reader-response Criticism*. (Representative critic[s]: E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*)

Biographical Criticism Interpretation or evaluation of a work of literature based upon the writer’s life experiences. Along with philological criticism, this was, in the nineteenth century, a primary mode in which critics worked. A variant is

criticism as intellectual biography, the great example of which is John Livingston Lowe's *The Road to Xanadu*. (Representative critic[s]: Samuel Johnson.)

Colonial and Post-Colonial Studies Criticism that addresses literary works in the context of the production of those works under colonial rule and prejudices or in response to or as part of the overthrow of colonial rule and prejudices. (Representative critic[s]: Edward Said)

Deconstruction A controversial approach to criticism, associated with the French theorist Jacques Derrida, that involves subjecting to critique the inherited structural (typically binary) categories of thought that inform one's understanding of a work and, especially, those aspects of one's thought (of one's carving up of the mental landscape) that are typically privileged. People tend to think in terms of inherited binary oppositions: hot/cold, good/bad, sacred/profane, male/female, democratic/totalitarian, rational/irrational, rich/poor, and so on. Commonly, in a particular language community, one of these poles is privileged. Deconstruction involves critiquing these inherited assumptions by various means, such as denying that the distinction exists, describing the categories as existing along a continuum with in-between states, positing additional categories, or privileging the category that is ordinarily not privileged. For example, the play *Romeo and Juliet* is usually read as being about the rashness, or lack of forethought, of young people in love. This reading privileges reason over impulsiveness. A deconstruction of the play might argue that, in fact, it celebrates impulsiveness, showing that despite the dangers of such impulsiveness, its rewards are worth the price, or it might argue that the play is a critique of the very categories of impulsiveness versus careful, calm, rational planning and forethought. (Representative critic[s]: Jacques Derrida, Paul de Mann)

Didactic Criticism Criticism that addresses the moral or political message(s) of a work in order to advance a moral or political point of view. Most quotidian Biblical criticism, of the kind found in sermons, is didactic criticism. (Representative critic[s]: Jonathan Edwards)

Euhemerism The interpretation of a literary work (or a work from an oral tradition) as having made fantastical, through retelling, actual historical persons, places, and events. (Representative critic[s]: Euhemerus)

Evaluation The process of making judgments about the quality of a literary work.

Evolutionary Criticism Criticism that focuses on how a work of literature meets survival needs (e.g., “Storytelling is a means of practicing theory of mind and, importantly, of others’ motivations, an important survival skill”). (Representative critic[s]: Brian Boyd)

Feminist Criticism Criticism that explores works of art in light of the social construction of gender roles and identities and that subjects works to scrutiny with regard to those constructions. (Representative critic[s]: Judith Butler, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar)

Formalism Criticism that focuses on features intrinsic to a work of art, such as its structure, genre, motifs, and techniques, as opposed to extrinsic features (ones outside the work), such as its historical origins or milieu. Formalism strives toward objectivity, viewing the work as an object for analysis by scientific or quasi-scientific methods. (Representative critic[s]: Roman Jakobson, Vladimir Propp, Stith Thompson)

Freudian Criticism Criticism that examines works of art, including literary works, using the concepts and techniques of Freudian psychoanalysis. Often such criticism analyzes works or the actions of characters as expressions of unconscious motivations or desires (for example, as wish fulfillment or as symbolic representations of suppressed wishes or desires), or as vicarious working out of unresolved conflicts, such as childhood competition with the father. (Representative critic[s]: Sigmund Freud and Ernest Jones on *Hamlet*, Lionel Trilling)

Hermeneutic Circle The process of successively arriving at an understanding of an object of interest, such as a literary or other artistic work, by revisiting and revising those understandings. The basic idea is that one can never, at the outset (or ever), simply see the work as it is in itself. People bring their own preconceptions to a work. They revise their preconceptions based on the work, and their understandings of the work based upon their revised conceptions. So, they circle back and forth between the work and their own conceptions, in stages. The phrase *hermeneutic circle* is also sometimes used to refer to the

successive process of understanding part of a work in terms of the whole and the whole in terms of its parts. (Representative critic[s]: Martin Heidegger)

Hermeneutics The theory and, less frequently, the practice of interpretation.

Historicism Criticism that examines works of art, including literary works, as reflections of the historical periods in which they were created, recognizing that understanding of the historical period is reconstructive and difficult, given one's own different context and understandings. Such criticism is typically thought of as requiring confrontation with the unfamiliar and an attempted "merger of horizons" (of the perspectives of the reader and the perspectives found in the text). See *New Historicism* and the *hermeneutic circle*. (Representative critic[s]: Hans-Georg Gadamer)

Interpretation The process of arriving at the "meaning" of a literary work (however that is construed).

Interpretive Community A group of persons with a shared lens through which literary works are viewed. (Representative critic[s]: Stanley Fish)

Intertextual Analysis 1. Narrowly speaking, an analysis that looks at the relationships between or among spoken or written texts. A description of the influence of West African song on American blues music would be an intertextual analysis in this sense. 2. More broadly, an analysis that looks at relationships between or among worldviews. A description of the differences and interactions between the worldviews of, say, prewar slave owners and enslaved persons would be an intertextual analysis in this sense. For example, post-Civil-War white minstrel shows made use of exaggerated racist stereotypes based on such aspects of pre-war African-American culture as the cakewalk dance but without understanding that the cakewalk was itself a satirical form used to parody the exaggerated pretensions of the slave-owning class. Such an explanation of minstrel shows is an example of intertextual analysis. (Representative critic[s]: Henry Lewis Gates, Jr.)

Marxist Criticism Criticism based upon the political and economic theories of Karl Marx and his followers, and especially criticism that focuses on works of art as products of or responses to antagonistic relations among the social classes (class struggle), and criticism that views works as products of deterministic

historical or economic forces. (Representative critic[s]: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Antonio Gramsci, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson.)

Mimetic Criticism Criticism that naively evaluates works of art based upon their verisimilitude, or correspondence with “reality.” (Representative critic[s]: Plato, Aristotle, Eric Auerbach)

New Criticism A critical movement of the twentieth century that emphasized close reading and treatment of works as self-contained objects of study (“little worlds”) to which matters such as the author’s biography and the historical circumstances of the work are irrelevant. (Representative critic[s]: William Wimsatt, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren)

New Historicism An approach to literary criticism that considers works as they are determined by their limited historical contexts and perspectives and by the power relations that existed in the time in which the works were created *and vice versa* (recognizing that works of art help to create those). The New Historicism focuses on exposing or critiquing those contexts, perspectives, and power relations while acknowledging the inevitable historical biases of the critic herself or himself and thus the anachronistic nature of any critical undertaking. (Representative critic[s]: Stephen Greenblatt)

Paradigmatic Analysis In Structuralist thinking and criticism, consideration of conceptual structures or relations existing simultaneously, especially relations in which concepts are determined negatively in relation to one another by what they are not (e.g., a raw thing is that which is not cooked, and a cooked thing is that which is not raw). Paradigmatic analysis is contrasted with syntagmatic analysis. The classic example is Claud Levi-Strauss’s analysis of the structure of the Oedipus myth. (Representative critic[s]: Claude Levi-Strass, Roland Barthes)

Philological Criticism Criticism based upon study of word origins, meanings, and relationships across languages over time. A primary mode in which nineteenth-century critics worked, this approach was used in the so-called German “higher criticism” of Hebrew religious texts that established the various strands of texts that made up the Old Testament Torah and was used by Max Müller and others to bolster the Solar Hypothesis that folk tales and later versions of myths derive from a primordial solar mythology involving a sky father and an Earth mother. (e.g., Heinrich Graf and Julius Wellhausen, Max Müller)

Reader-Response Criticism Criticism based upon the idea that interpretation and evaluation of a literary work is a highly subjective process in which the reader “constructs” the text in the process of reading it. A controversial approach to literary criticism, reader-response criticism is summed up in the phrase “There are no texts, only readings.” (Representative critic[s]: Louise Rosenblatt, Stanley Fish)

Structuralism An approach to the human sciences, such as anthropology, literary criticism, and philosophy, that emphasizes understanding of the structures of thought, feeling, and interaction in a culture, and, in particular, understanding of conceptual structures involving binary relations such as raw/cooked, human/animal, kin/not-kin, male/female, acceptable/taboo, foreign/native, right/wrong, in-group/out-group, etc. See *Paradigmatic Analysis* and *Syntagmatic Analysis*. (Representative critic[s]: Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes)

Syntagmatic Analysis In structuralist thinking and criticism, consideration of formal structure or relations over time, such as the unfolding grammar of a sentence, the unfolding argument of a piece of writing, or the changes in a language over time. Contrasted with paradigmatic analysis. (Representative critic[s]: Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes)

Textual Criticism Close analysis of the attributes of a text and of its alternate versions, often done in order to establish a definitive version for publication. (Representative critic[s]: Bruce Metzger, Kurt and Barbara Aland)

Theory 1. A set of general or abstract principles that are potentially falsifiable and so scientific and that both explain and relate a body of facts and have predictive power. Examples of theories in this sense are the Theory of Gravitation and the Theory of Relativity; 2. In literary studies, a general name given to a wide variety of recent approaches to literary criticism that emphasize examination and critique of constructed social and critical norms—a shortened version of the term *critical theory*.

A few notes:

1. It is important to distinguish between *meaning as the author’s intention* and *meaning as significance to the reader* (the consequences for you of

having had the experience of the work). A LOT of the confusion in literary studies (even among great critics) results from not understanding this distinction.

2. With regard to meaning as significance, you must first enter imaginatively into the world of the work and have that experience, and it is that experience that then will have (perhaps) significance to you. There is no substitute for taking the author's trip.
3. Arriving at an understanding of meaning as intention requires a LOT of attention to matters outside the text (such as genre and other conventions employed, historical circumstance of the work, and the author's biography and concerns). Texts exist in context.

SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO LIVE WITH A TEXT. IT WILL MEAN MORE TO YOU AS YOU GET OLDER.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob Shepherd is a writer, editor, graphic designer, and teacher.

Résumé

Name: Robert D. Shepherd, previously known (at age 4) as Bobbie Dale

Contact: Sure, feel free

Address: Various liminal interstices in a truly tiny portion of space-time as perceived by certain Third Chimpanzee lifeforms, e.g., Turtle Island

Position sought: None, but, seriously, thank you

Experience: O yes yes yes! More of this!!!

Skills

- Listening, laughter, song, massage, prayer (pardon the redundancy)
- Monkey dance
- Presentness
- Quietness at center
- Being the eyes, ears, skin, paws, cirri, antennae, mandibles, notochords, tentacles, pilifers, ampullae, lateral lines, pseudo-pods, papillae, flagella, and other sensory and cognitive extensions/manifestations of the One
- Disrobing of fruits
- Rapid phase transitions
- Wrapping burritos, veggie sushi, babies (adept)
-

Languages

Of some trees and birds, various kami, past/still present laughing masters, several languages of the guitar

Hobbies

Aie yie yie! OMG, of course!

References

Trust your Self on this one! LOL.

Enthusiasms

Gardening, cooking (especially baking), curriculum design, pedagogical approaches, open- and crowd-sourced educational materials, linguistics (syntax, semantics, child

language acquisition, history of writing systems), hermeneutics, rhetoric, philosophy (Continental philosophy, Existentialism, metaphysics, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, epistemology, ethics), classical and jazz guitar, poetry, the short story, theater, film theory and technique, archaeology and cultural anthropology, prehistory, cultural history and variation, history of ideas, crazy speculation about the future, sustainability, veganism and vegetarianism, Social Democratic politics, exobiology, odd lifeforms, mycology, Anglo-Saxon literature and language, states of consciousness, systems for emergent quality control, heuristics for innovation

Credo

To paraphrase Tom Joad, in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

A person ain't got a soul of his or her own, just a little piece of a big soul, the one big soul that belongs to everybody, and then . . . then it don't matter. Whatever happens, I'll be all around in the dark – I'll be everywhere. Wherever you can look – wherever there's a migrant family walking a thousand miles to apply for amnesty so that the children can eat and live safely, I'll be there. Wherever people are shouting down some white woman who called the cops on folks for barbecuing while black, I'll be there. I'll be in the way people stood up to the thugs with badges who came to arrest them at Stonewall. I'll be in every Pride parade. I'll be in the way trans kids laugh when they're accepted for who they are, and in the way women walk out on the company that wants to arbitrate away their right not to be pawed at. I'll be in the crowd taking pictures when the cops are beating up some black kid. I'll be standing between the woman on the subway wearing a hijab and the young men taunting her. I'll be in the cell with the guy talking to the law school students who'll find the DNA evidence to exonerate him. I'll be at the factory gates with the poor people sick of being sick, of being poisoned. I'll be with the pigs in the transport truck heading to the slaughterhouse, with the chickens in the battery cages. I'll be in the next desk over cheering on the kid who writes, "My mind is not standardized enough to formulate the required responses" and nothing else on the standardized test. When the old people march on the capitol to protect their healthcare and Social Security and extend Medicare to all because it's cheaper and more decent and every other country has done it, I'll be there. And when the young people working at McDonald's or Walmart fight not just for a living wage but for a union as well, I'll be there, too.

And a final note: OK, I've been turning over ideas for my next career. What do you think? Beauty influencer on Instagram and TikTok because I'm fabulous that way? Japanese pop music idol? Dirigible driver? Cat wrangler? Crow whisperer? King of Thailand? Masked avenger? Low-wire artist? Rock trainer? ("Sit, rock, sit.") Alienist? Ghost buster? Yoga pants designer? Poet taster? Evolution research and development engineer? Plant psychotherapist?