

Ars Poetica

How I Began to Write After Kate Left – A Short Poetics

Keeping a notebook about writing before beginning to write. Always before, I had the intent and desire to read books about how to write – only to have it vanish into the nowhere that kept me back. I don't devote myself, I lecture. But now, a place for it all to stick, to sink in. A place to ferment, to "happen".

Every act of writing now evolves to become an act of relaxation. Buying the notebook, handling it, opening it to the next, new page, picking up where yesterday left. Each act relaxed, a joy to perform. Even lining off the pages an act of devotion, because I choose it.

That's why one mustn't rush after "topics", "images" – "what will be the subject of my next poem?" A farce, if it's written at all. One mustn't force and grab, run them down like frightened pedestrians whose helpless last dash does not quite make the sidewalk. That slash at writing loses all the pleasure. And with the pleasure flows out the vitality, the motion, the sharp clarity lent by the deliberate ease, easing without noticing into writing.

Then the compelling ribbon unwinds, flowing so that, following it, the words spin out like miles beneath the tires and without hardly realizing it, here we are, in unexplored country, an unaccustomed climate, breathing deeply, pushing back arching into the seat, both hands on the steering wheel, just beginning to surmise the freedom into which I've raced, crossing into a new state, reveling in the sun.

It doesn't matter very much what is said. Whatever it is will be interesting if the attention is lucid and invitation is made to a living response. There are no uninteresting topics, only uninteresting writers.

This writing passes through that gate at which I stop writing for anyone, even myself. This is the gate to writing for the joy of expression alone. Not for lovers, mentors, historians (who will surely loudly chorus their having being left behind); not for teachers, loved poets read well, family, friends. Least of all for editors and critics. No one at all.

This technique (if it is "technique") is no craft but a state of being. Not the culmination but the stream that carries there. Much hard work cannot be denied. Journals, freewriting notebooks slip off sliding into the heat that lures all clothes to drop. Hide for lovemaking. Slip off and place your hand on that belly of unbelievably large roundness. There will be labor to be sure. When it comes there will be no stopping it, and the labor will not release until the birth lies red and squalling on the ground – and this too a joy of joys. Ask any mother.

The Poetics of Listening

Poetry is *listening*. The Old Latin roots of the word "obey" are *ob* (before) and *audire* (to hear). This is a hearing that is an obedience. This is an obedience that listens deeply.

This is a hearing that arrives before the word is spoken. It hears the Word that lies beneath the spoken word, the creative Word, the *Logos spermatikos*.

This is an obedience that listens deeply to what is needed or what wants to come to life and responds; that says yes to what life asks of us – "to hear is to obey."

Poetry's obedience is like that known by those who pray, who meditate, who are mindful. One sitting Zen who finds their way to this sort of obedience has found the connection to other spiritual traditions, particularly to prayer. This depth is achieved by those who, as the sculptor Joe Query used to say, are able to "get Joe out of the way." This is the intersection of spiritual practice and art or poetry. Poetry is received by listening with deep intent to obey.

Those who write, or pray, or create art with their own selves "in the way" are like the students of Zen who say "I am going to be in the present moment. I am going to practice 'no self'." Though this is hilarious, but many exhort themselves in just this self-contradictory way – and not a few of them have been at it for years. Of course, there is no path more certain to remove oneself from the present moment and from no self as to say "I am going to do it." As Gil Bailey said to his Temenos class, the ego

is ready to raise its hand and say “You have a project? I’m your man.”

Or you might think of it in terms of the sort of listening that is needed to sing – to hear the music and sing *that* and not something else. Listening hard, I can hear the poem like a far-off song: I listen to that and write it down as well as I can. This is an act of faith, and a faithfulness. We rely on it until it becomes reliable.

We might look into other clues hidden in common words. To write poetry is to *observe*. Again, the Old Latin roots are *ob* (before) and *servo* (to hold or keep). This is the act that serves by holding; keeping what is there mindfully before the quiet attention. Zen calls it “bare attention”.

True poetry is known by its *quality of attention*. Neither style, nor content, nor craft define poetry – it is the poet’s quality of attention that counts. Good poetry has that quality of attention and recreates it in the reader. It embodies and inspires that attention, evoking it in its readers; arriving through the poet’s attention, it commands attention.

Attention is not mere detail, much of which is uninteresting. Though poetry requires detail, is built on luminous detail, when it is reduced to recitation of detail alone it becomes doggerel. There is no precise word for or limit to the detail to which poetry attends, but it catches us when we read it; it catches us up.

Thus we have the kind of observation in which neither the thing observed nor the self are held apart or absolute. This is as widely known as the traditions that run from Plotinus to Hindu and Buddhist practice. One can find it in the parables of Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount, and in the Diamond Sutra, which repeats many times “because we know that there is no such thing, we are free to speak”.

Poetry is *breath*. It finds its rhythm in the breath. It is inspiration. Inspiration is breath, spirit; it is the breath that vitalizes the body; it is the life energy that makes the poem come alive. It follows the flow of the Tao; it is *present*.

Poetry is *motion*. “A poem is a great silence like the ocean. I go to the ocean whenever I can, not hear the all-pervasive *om* of those

waters, but to hear the silence of myself that is washed up on those shores. The things I hear are not in me, not in the ocean, but somewhere in between.”

Poetry moves in such spaces, in this same silence. “It is not in the words of the poem, not in myself, but in the many-feathered flight between. A poem takes place instantaneously, simultaneously, like the flight of many birds.”

Robert Sund said it well in an editorial entitled *The Thoughts of Turtles Are All Turtles* (published in 1969 in his long-forgotten Sullivan Slough Review): *The movement of a poem is more important than the images in it. That is why we go to the banks of moving streams, though we wash our hands in water every day.*

“Motion is the rustling in tall grass. Try to define it. Harvested grass does not rustle. All the grasshoppers hide.”

Poetry written this way *opens*. As one part opens, it leads to further openings – soon it is as if a whole series of doors open. Robert Sund, again: *The good poem has the effect of collapsing all the sides of many separate boxes, to reveal a realm we could all travel through freely.*

If this is handled well, the poem may bring the reader into that center accessed in *listening* to the poem when it came.

Meaning in poetry, like life, *lies in our participation in it*. And like life, that participation creates meaning by enacting and unfolding relationships.

The art is to say, but not too much. The art is not to say too much. The art is to say. Poetry should not be confused with craft; craft is too much emphasized because it is all that writing schools can teach; it is not the central thing. At first, the central task is to develop a critical mass – a mass of rough, unreformed writing, taking form in notebooks and on scraps of paper. This body of work takes on its own weight, its own momentum, and eventually its own life.

At first this body of work is no more refined than a Golem, but left to ferment, it composts; it gathers shape, definition and meaning. Over years, it ferments. Then the practice of writing becomes this: go to it, turn it over, and listen

to it. Turn over the compost and return to it over periods that may measure decades. Wait long enough to be surprised again by what is there, the faint sound of the poem rising again to the listening ear. Wait long enough to forget the over-edited drafts, so that it speaks freshly again the words that wanted to be heard. Hear it again for the first time. Expect to revise 20 or 30 times over as many years. One hundred revisions are not too many.

With this body and this patience and the practice of listening, it becomes possible to write poetry.

I confess that I don't much believe in craft, writing workshops, writing competitions, or the feverish chase to get published or win an M.A. from a prestigious Fine Arts program. All this has more to do with connections and politics than it does poetry. Poetry is not a political practice, though it may be an extremely potent political event. Paying too much attention to politics subverts poetry. One may, as a result, never write poetry, which may be a blessing if the alternative isolates work from the roots of creativity and yields sterile writing that moves no one at their core, however 'good' it may be from the point of view of craft or prevailing fashion.

The deepest poetry comes from somewhere else. Only after it is received is a poet justified in applying craft to it, and then it must be with a sensibility that approaches the same reverence with which we hold the earth. Then the poet must know and apply the skills of a master craftsman, because a poorly crafted poem is nothing but a journal entry.

Still, one shouldn't begin with an attempt to 'make' a poem. Artifice yields verse. This advice departs fundamentally from workshop poetry and from M.A.-in-Creative-Writing exercises. 'Assigned poetry' is a contradiction in terms. Poetry 'exercises' may be helpful in learning craft, but one should be very clear that poetry is inseparable from the kind of communion that lies within prayer, meditation, and the great spiritual traditions, or within the ancient shamanic union with an animal, a plant, or some other part of nature. To be successful as a poet, one must come to grips with one's ego every bit as deeply as a Carmelite monk, a student of Zen, or a depth psychologist. We are talking about wrestling with Jacob's angel here, not writing a Hallmark Card.

Poetry leads deeper, connects with 'the Ground of Being', and however much 'sophisticates' may snicker or roll their eyes, it connects with soul and with the breath of spirit. One cannot live – one can scarcely breath – in the atmosphere of the sophisticated; it is impossible to write poetry there.

One must cut to write. Good poetry has no unnecessary words, no wordy rambling, no purple passages that exist only to provide the opportunity for coveted words to be said. It contains no imagery that carries less than its own weight, nothing that dilutes or distracts from its movement to its own center. No commentary, no self-indulgent confessional, no persona intrudes.

Listening becomes a deep well of great clarity, and the face reflected there does not belong to us though it is our own. Many poets mistake their own voice for the One speaking and so announce, comment, confess, inventory, detail, forcibly extract and draw out what is no more interesting than themselves. The One speaking waits until the yakking stops; then that One may begin speaking again.

Poetry is a medium of Truth. That is why, no matter how out of fashion the terms may be, the timeless poets are students of the True, the Good, the Beautiful. In the second rank of poets are the students of craft who quibble over fashion, manner, and words.

Poetry is only incidentally a writing process. The poet moves in poetry to a place of participation and obedience that is known only by walking there. Those religious who can hear are told "Remove your shoes; you step on holy ground." The Zen master practicing ken-hen is empty; the dancer steps on the boards; the musician who has tuned now watches the conductor, ready. For any person of knowledge, knowledge is their practice. Writing is no more and as much to poetry as movement is to dance or colors to art – the medium, the means whereby; that which is shaped in soul.

Just as all move and few dance, so many write but rarely poetry. Without motion, writing is nothing to the poet. Poetry lies in the moving, not in the writing; the poet is the one who knows the motion, listens to it, is faithful, and works under its direction. The poet, like the farmer, is "one who lives on the grace and

resources of another.” This is the poetry of inner and outer, the poetry of relationship, the poetry of motion, the motion that establishes relationship, the relationship that is inner and outer, the things of the world and those of the soul. A poem is a longing for the union of inner and outer.

Senses, emotions, thought – alone none are sufficient for poetry; even brought together they mean nothing for poetry. It is the quality of attention, unexpected beauty startlingly right, that creates poetry.

In poetry, make the adjective a verb by bringing in the active noun which creates the adjectival condition:

Pick up a dusk from the notes of last year – leave dusk and nothing solid behind. Leave me no longer an oar on a rudderless night.

The mature skill in poetry is to leave the inchoate fragments inarticulate as they are.

*I prefer the poems I'm scared to write
the rest are useless as flatirons*

A Letter Declining Participation in a 1980's Poetry Group

I am writing to thank you for having me join your Wednesday evening group, but also to say that I don't think it will work for me. Our goals and attitude toward poetry differ enough that I would not be comfortable, although I felt a warm and immediate rapport with almost everyone there.

For me, poetry is not and cannot be motivated by the drive to prove that I'm 'better' than others, win competitions, or even publish. Doubtless mine is an idiosyncratic attitude, but to go against it would be to undermine the basis of my writing.

Poetry is what leads deeper, connects with the Ground of Being, with soul and the breath of spirit. I have struggled with this and come to the realization that I resist publication, workshops, competitions, and the rest, perhaps because the competitive drive is so strong in me, because I sense the danger of abandoning the core of my writing to editorial and critical wrangles.

Wednesday's minor dispute, for example, about whether a certain person was "writing at the level of our group" left me nonplussed. Also, the urge expressed to have "all of us enter the contests and sweep the prizes" is not where I want to be in my writing.

As a group process, I would find it more useful to be less focused on explaining and defending work and more on responding to it whole. It is more productive for me to simply listen to the reactions and absorb what is useful in them. This is not meant to be a judgment, but a recognition of what I need to do.

A benchmark for me would have been if I had been inspired to go back and write, but I'm afraid the group didn't do much for me there (although the encounter did move me to write a critique of the contemporary literary aesthetic, to clarify for myself my own position on writing poetry. That is an essay I've been putting off for years, and I'm grateful to this encounter for bringing me to write it.)

I marvel at the ability of poetry to speak deeply to one person, leave another indifferent, and aggravate a third. We must honor that dynamic when we evaluate our own work and other's. It is unhelpful to claim all truth for one particular aesthetic or critical stance and apply it mercilessly to all comers. Worse, it actively violates the nature of poetry.

Such an approach almost always imposes one person's personal style on another. I find few critics who convince me that their perspective should earn my trust. Most criticism does not rise above pet theories or favored perspectives which, far from revealing the work at hand (which is the true charge of literary criticism), only layers it with more sludge that must be cleared away to see the poem itself. If this is true of most printed criticism, how much more so of that writer's group eager to 'instruct' me or you!

This sort of critical approach too easily leads to no-win arguments over theories of writing. There is no one right answer. Too often self-appointed experts arrogate to themselves the role of judge, with small qualifications. No special qualifications are needed to respond to a poem; how much better if we simply leave it at that! It demands more skill to hear each piece speaking out of its own center and respond to that whole – even if the response is

kindly advice to leave it in the journal for now.

It takes only one person who sees herself as an instructor, who refuses to step outside her critical aesthetic, to create a noxious atmosphere. So while I thank for the opportunity to meet a wonderful group of people, I ask you to excuse me in the future.

Reading "Best of American Poetry" and American Poetry Review in the 1990's

I am struck by the laziness in what is presented as finished work. There seems to be the idea that expressing a "poetic thought" is enough, that somehow shared intimacy will make up what's needed. Poor imitations of Robert Bly abound. And where effort is applied, the poems seem "worked over". There is a difference – a big one – between a poem that's finished and one that's overwrought, though at least here the poet is working, exerting effort, generating heat, even if the heat is more of a fever and a feverish casting about.

A.R. Ammons "nine poems" in the July/August 1998 APR is an example of lazy poetry. These may be readable journal entries, but they are not readable poems. The poet prattles on like some small child who believes his audience will be fascinated by anything he says. Except he hasn't the redeeming charm of a little boy. Why does he feel these are justifiable calls on our attention? Because he has something of a name? Who has encouraged him to consider these occasional thought pieces, self-satisfied insight, and unsolicited advice *poetry*?

Rilke *finished* his poems. Bly once did, but has increasingly allowed himself to publish "arranged journal entries" – *Morning Poems* is an egregious example. Snyder's *Axe Handles* the same. Pieces that should have been worked until they were finished are slapped down and peddled as if we are rubes who can't tell any better – because this is, after all, Bly or Snyder or Ammons.

The Gertrude Stein effect – writers so highly satisfied with themselves that they are unlikely to contribute much beyond their own self-estimation.

Much of what is published in "The Best American Poetry" seems mere exercises. It has no depth. The work has engaged only the writer's craft, perhaps the mind. They sound

bored with their own work. This is mostly overworked artifice. It does not penetrate. It bears little of the quality of attention that defines great poetry. It wasn't *lived*; it was made up. Little or nothing is written because it cannot be denied, because it *must* be said; little breaks free to carry the poem with it. We are presented with the residue left after messing about with the chemistry set.

These poems say that poetry at the end of the 20th century in America has become weak, puerile. There is a feeling of young adults just beginning to explore and unable yet to discriminate.

Critics

November 28, 2015

What is there to reply? Critics almost without exception set off at once on the wrong trail, hounds baying up a tree once climbed by an escaped convict a century ago. The critic actually seems to think that the poet's true call is to create a work of literature! Many seem to think it meaningful to trail along for a little while, inserting the poet's lines into storylines of their own devising: "you see here the poet feels this and then that. And this then leads to..." As if that were anything other than a portrait of the critic as a small child singing a song to himself in the day-yard. The critic is desperately concerned with helping that child map out and secure a life. Does anyone but a critic think that the poet's function is cartography? And even if a bread crumb trail is left, you are being invited to look at the trail itself; not to ignore it for the sake of where it leads. Either you enter into the poem, or you don't. If you enter, you may find the bread crumb trail fascinating. If not, you will not find anything else. There is no explanation.

But there is something you can *do*.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning on Editors and Critics

Whosoever writes great poetry,
Looks just to art. He does not write for you,
Or me – for London or Edinburgh;
He will not suffer the best critic known
To step into his sunshine of free thought
And self=absorbed conception and exact
An inch=long swerving of the holy lines.

...

What the poet writes, he writes:
Mankind accepts it if it suits

And that's success; if not, the poem's passed
From hand to hand, and yet from hand to hand,
Until the unborn snatch it, crying out
In pity on their fathers' being so dull,
And that's success too.

Aurora Leigh, Book V, ll. 252-267

Poets of Influence

Pablo Neruda was my brother. From our hands, poetry fell continuous petals into the world. Rilke spoke quietly, intently mentoring a young poet. Rumi pulled me back, drunk, from the edge of the roof. Jimenez dropped me through the hole the moon went through, we sat in pale light in a soaking tub at Mar Vista. Tu Fu translated by Kenneth Rexroth supplied green wine bottles and red lobster shells and the sound of cars starting outside. At first I tried being Gary Snyder until I realized that he would always be better at being Gary Snyder than I would, so I inhabited my place as advised and marveled at his present-moment ordinary-enlightenment this-world poetry. I waited with Galway Kinnell; his scope grows as years pass. And for the enormous generosity of Robert Bly's readings and teachings and translations, felt deep gratitude.

Though I read all of Whitman and Dickenson and loved them, Pound affected me more in a few lines, though he was not a man easy to love. And Eliot, though he could be a prig, was incisive and curt.

Many Scandinavian and Spanish poets: Tomas Tranströmer, Rolf Jacobsen, Hjalmar Gullberg, some of Gunnar Ekelöf, Harry Martinson, Olav Hauge. Some of Millay, Yeats, Cummings, Goethe, Trakl, Pasternak, Seifert. Mystic poets translated by Bly – Kabir, Mirabai. Chinese and Japanese poetry. A little of Frost and Sandberg.

Much Too Late, for Galway Kinnell

May 28, 2020

Much too late at this late date, too late to thank the late poet, born in 1927, passed in 2014, aged 87 – whose work passed too, from all I can tell, unattended by the accolades it deserves – a major American poet of the past half-century, perhaps the past century. I wish I had thanked him sooner.

Perhaps if I had started sooner, if I had been precocious and read (what a kingdom it was!) his first book when he first signed the copy I'm reading today – October 30, 1966, when I was

12, I might have thanked him in time. Certainly I could not have read it when it was published, in 1960, when I was six – though just 3 years after the signature in this book, in 1969, a teacher much like Kinnell, Bob McAllister (himself passed just a few years ago), suddenly lit poetry like the explosion when the sun comes just beneath the thin crease of dark horizontal clouds.

Bob must have been just in his 20's himself then, when he came to BHS (I was in 10th grade, the same year I fell in love). Yet another 3 years on, in the Spring of 1972, he assigned me Robert Sund's *The Thoughts of Turtles Are All Turtles* (self-printed by Sund in, so far as I can tell, the one and only [1969] edition of his *Sullivan Slough Review*) – when Bob sponsored me, my first year at The Evergreen State College, living 2 months with 3 friends in a small seaside cabin at Cannon Beach, on an independent learning contract.

I had a copy of Sund's essay that Bob had typed out and mimeographed; I read Sund's appraisal of Robert Bly ("it appears that he has kicked a hole in a hornet's nest") and noted that he said "American poets who do this well are James Wright, John Logan, Robert Bly, Galway Kinnell, and Gary Snyder". I immediately looked them all up, though I read only the last three extensively. I brought Gary Snyder with me to Cannon Beach, *Earth House Hold and Regarding Wave*, to read for that same poetry paper assigned by Bob, *Poetry and Motion*, typed on a continuous roll of coarse paper towel, probably lifted from a gas station men's room in devoted imitation of Jack Kerouac.

But Sund (also passed many years ago). I met him only once, his massive head, his mane of white hair near-ethereal, the presence of poetry itself, he gave a reading in perhaps 1973 or 1974, attended I think by no more than a half-dozen or so of us at the Evergreen Library. He lit candles, intoned "Shi Shi...Shi Shi...Shi Shi" from one of his poems – which sent me on a solo hike to that beach, lone tip of Washington's Olympic Peninsula.

I remember but one Kinnell reading (November 16, 1984 at Olney Hall in the Bay Area; I have the stub as a bookmark); heard Snyder many times and Bly often through the 80's and 90's; and of course many of McAllister's classes and workshops, friend and mentor over more than 10 years. And of them all, thanked adequately

only Snyder and McAllister. All the others passing inconceivably.

Sund was a student of Roethke, Bly an intimate of James Wright, editor of *The Fifties* and its successors and so many unmatched collections, *nonpareil* translator of Swedish and Spanish language poets: Neruda, Jimenez, Lorca, Aleixandre, Machado, Mistral, Vallejo, Tranströmer, Martinson, Ekelöf, Jacobsen, plus Rumi, Mirabai and Kabir. Though Snyder seems *sui generis* there were Ginsburg, Rexroth, the San Francisco Beats, Lew Welch, Phil Walen, and the shared Pacific NW outdoor camping and hiking and trail work that made him of a piece with all I knew most intimately myself.

And now Kinnell, I learn very late, shared many of my own major influences in poetry – Rilke, Pound, Yeats, Williams, Whitman, Dickinson. It is a deep-infolding world – the word – but I think now, re-reading the English language poets late in life, none were more influential than Kinnell – his cascading, on-flowing line, his sudden stunning emotions bared in imagery fundamental to us all.

***Mozart and Salieri* by Nadezhda Mandelstam**

June 18, 2020

First, there is her picture on the cover, so strikingly like one I have of Kate that each time I pick her up that I think it is Kate's voice. She writes conversations in memory of Mandelstam and Akhmatova, the metaphors of Mozart and Salieri from Pushkin's *Little Tragedies*, standing for inspiration and the work of craft, both necessary, and here I find much of my own poetics, coming over a static-y radio, a signal sent 100 years ago. I copy only a little, the most important, here:

The poem is alive with an inner image...There is not one word yet, but the poem already sounds...this is the poet's hearing touching it. To this we must listen and be true.

...the poet is immersed...he listens to himself, to his inner voice...the heavy spirit of private listening...this very moment of tense listening...like a whisper the inner voice is so elusively quiet... one must have just that...one must not replace it with anything else...don't invent it.

I don't know that I would say I listen to myself exactly, but it is an intense listening, which I

liken to trying to catch the strain of song heard faint and far away, so that one could reproduce it faithfully, because one sings what one hears and not just whatever one likes. This is why drafts must be put away long enough to hear them again new. Do this when long labor has made one's own invention indistinguishable from what you strain to hear, so that coming on them fresh again some months or years later, you may surprise them and hear again and more clearly the words that wanted to be said. With practice this becomes a practice, a facility more easily practiced.

The condition under which the inner voice is heard and the poem is composed does not depend on the will of the poet. It requires surrender, something often said – but critics and versifiers only say it, whereas poets practice it.

Only at moments of most remarkable concentration can the poet...hear... But then there comes what she calls Salieri, the necessity of work to solidify and compose the work. But of course it is not labor to the poet. You do not "edit" a poem, you continually recreate it. It ferments, you approach it anew, a new creative act, hearing what you did not make out before.

