

# Temenos

Temenos was a seminar study group convened by Gil Bailie in Sonoma, California, meeting throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. We read the great works of Western Civilization and, later, of the Biblical tradition. Many of these poems are recreations and crystallizations of what went on in some of those meetings.

## Temenos

a huddle of dry leaves, we lodge  
in any doorway. swept  
on the first gusts of a rising storm  
we haphazardly attend the seminar.

our voices crackle, indistinct – if loud,  
then static pieced into meaning  
over distant radio; if low,  
then brittle brown leaves blown and shifting  
in discomfort (we voice our thoughts  
in the seminar).

bits of litter rushed suddenly from their places,  
we skitter over the pavement – small  
complaints raised before a rising wind,  
a sweeping dismissal, little voices  
that blend within the impending cloudburst,  
drive into startling silence,  
leave impregnation, immensity, and waiting.

## A Piece of Chaung Brocade

A great blessing is a curse that cannot be denied  
a vision to which the whole life leaps  
a passion that becomes an inner prison, built up  
in fantasy within –

                        and then whirled  
away the moment one looks up. There  
is no choice but to go after and retrieve it  
or the inner life will die. To accept the proffered  
small box of gold – the practical consolation  
widely tendered – is to become a mean  
beggar hoarding a mean end.

It is possible to live neither in the vision  
nor out of it, on the small store  
which quickly runs out.

But if one endures to seek, it spreads out  
like a piece of Chaung brocade, a picture woven  
into a life which it is possible to live.

## Dry Salvages

It is what it always was –  
a groaner that sounds with the swells  
unendurable, durable, enduring remainder  
of what we always were.

Much as we wish to rush to the sea  
the river rises nonetheless in wild flood  
destroying, sweeping away pretensions  
our presumption to know the sea's eternity  
in the cry of the gull.

No one reaching open sea can afford to fail  
to attend to the tributary river.

Only the self finds the path to no self.

## Objective Correlative

*(Shelter from the Storm; Lear)*

Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

Nothing! I have sworn.

The quality of nothing has not such need  
to hide itself.

Nothing can be made of nothing.

Nothing connected with nothing.

I have no way.

Wherefore to Dover?

Who's there? Surrender

the terrified measuring psyche

let the storm dismantle

its framework of nothing.

## Temenos, Ash Wednesday: The Word

special insight of Judeo-Christian night  
beyond the pagan creation story and the deep ecology  
creation story, the emergence of the Word

*and God said*

the *logos spermatikos*, the inseminating Word  
neither big bang nor burgeoning green vegetation  
leafing forth, but the Word

and its incarnation, the tradition in great danger  
without it –

no listening, no obedience  
no transformation

where there is deafness, absurdity – *listen*  
the WORD  
is what says humanity: the koan

*if mountains say bear  
and oceans say salmon  
what says humanity?*

only we could understand bear or salmon  
to be said by mountain or ocean, and that –  
that question centers on saying  
reveals what says us –

the Word,

brought to consciousness  
so that nature now includes and completes  
itself. Physical revegetative burgeoning life  
is not enough. The Word  
can be known only in the negative,  
by the light it throws on the inadequate  
and the incomplete. It subverts and contradicts,  
turning all words inside out, the words  
that define and place and know  
what is indefinable.

The Word lies as a seed, from the beginning  
ripening in the human, coming to fruit,  
but still unsaid and unsayable.

The seed in the apple's core  
that was planted inside the eating humans  
inviting God to impregnate them  
and from their mouths the entire tree  
blossoming forth, blooming,  
limbs breaking, fruit falling to the ground, rotting  
and as sap rising up again the no longer innocent  
but not yet fully mature  
humans singing, speaking, calling to the God  
who is already within, seed, sperm, Word,  
tree, knowledge.

## Temenos Seminar

*December 8, 1988*

the apples slump  
soft flesh, puckered skin  
bananas brown  
the overripe fruit splits open  
spilling slowly to refertilize undug  
graves of black winter earth

the lips of old women's mouths  
the lines of their cheeks  
the slumping line of their backs  
down over their hams and the back of thick legs –  
now one curve

the old wombs of aging women –  
a circle of lamps  
candles in paper bags  
ring the seminar,  
flowers that have passed  
from beauty to beauty.



## Weaving

Helen weaves the tapestry of war,  
weaving the acts that men carry out,  
weaving through her life the fabric of which war is made.  
Penelope weaves and then undoes her weaving  
at night, temporizing, delaying  
holding the wrong solution in suspension until the moment is right.  
It is only when Andromache leaves her loom  
and Hector finds the human warmth of civilized life  
breaking into the story of the *Iliad*. And Hector imagines  
her at another's loom, weaving again. Leaving, he bids  
her go back to her loom. The ancient weaving  
is done in the womb and the thread that is pulled with the baby  
from the birth canal is cut only twice in a life: once then  
and once again at death. Andromache weaves whole cloth  
to clothe life; Helen weaves battle, her life is the loom  
upon which it is woven. Penelope weaves by day,  
unravels by night, trying to suspend life  
at a moment at which it might be picked up again.

## The Armor of Achilles

only the innocent mourn the loss  
of innocence.  
not Patroclus, the fair, the youthful –  
not Briseus, the fair votary –  
no, it is the loss of his armor  
that enrages Achilles.  
the invertebrate laid bare by the loss of his exoskeleton  
soft the inner man exposed,  
innocence itself slain by the stripping  
of its armor.

sheer innocence to rage  
against the loss of the innocent;  
the one who survives lives  
identified with his armor  
covering his great reservoir  
of un-lived life; like a baby red-faced  
and howling, helpless, vulnerable:  
the vaunted wrath                      of Achilles.

the famous shield of Haephestus, the city there,  
the public realm where,  
though murder be done, it is done in public,  
a people living identified  
with their skin, the outer sheath.

all progress since the Trojan War  
nothing more than what Haephestus engraved  
on the shield of Achilles.  
more than two dozen centuries later,  
Western Civilization a testament  
to how far this set of armor will carry us.

the Myrmidons tremble to look on it,  
their knees shake – the Myrmidons  
who do not tremble at man-destroying war, who  
could look even on the Gorgon's shield – why? because all their furious valor  
vaporizes  
like a morning mist, the mythology  
of anger dissolves, their manhood  
threatened by consciousness.

Achilles worries that Patroclus may decay.

Achilles, hoping to re-erect the defenses,  
Achilles hoping to find all within unchanged.  
Achilles, courting death rather than face change.  
Do we live on the surface of Haephestus' shield,  
renewing in ritual sacrifice the thin layer of violence  
and blood that averts the war of all against all?  
The civitas, the polis a mesh  
against unbridled rivalry, the war for dominance  
and territory. Killers, scapegoats?

Or, the view, just as old, that bases community  
on communion, common mind?

“Absolute action”, stepping out of history,  
no antecedents  
no anticipation of consequences,  
no historical dialectic –  
the act of free consciousness uprooted  
from historical conditions –

an act of the collective unconscious?

the attainment of enlightenment  
ordinary reality?

the turning point in the “arms race”, in the Illaid,  
racing chariots turn at the point marked  
by two white stones leaning against one another,  
victim and victor, exhausted, failing  
into one another's arms, weeping.

one cries “what have we done?”  
the other “what has been done to us?”

everything depends on how this turn is made,  
the pivot of history,  
the post marking the sacrificial victim  
in the arms of the soft invertebrate  
stripped of his armor.

in that turning lies revelation.

religere, binding back (not progressive),  
cyclic  
a spiral

the dialogue with the One who stands over against  
and That Thou Art.

not delivered into the arms of the enemy  
but the enemy's arms our own, opening.  
as old as the old blood sacrifice,  
as central to the establishment of human culture,  
as renewing as the turn about that point  
that lies not in the future,  
in spiritual evolution or the awakening of  
consciousness,  
but emerges beneath the old armor stripped off.

## Anthony & Cleopatra

If Cleopatra finds in Anthony  
and he in her  
that thing which transforms  
that which began their encounter  
– then what?

Or what *would* it take to wed Desdemona  
to the huge Moor – and have it succeed?

They have no relationship but to that  
which drew them together – that which  
they are transforming in one another.

How will they marry  
when the act  
moves its very ground?

## Anthony & Cleopatra, Act III

Anthony tries to turn back on his path,  
to return to who he was,  
but can no longer play the part.  
Alchemical Cleopatra softens toward solutio.  
And so when Anthony meets Ceasar on that sea,  
Ceasar, unconscious, is not drawn off,  
but Anthony from the corner of his eye  
follows her sails, what moves on and in  
those depths.  
The sea dissolves his strength;  
the battle is decided.

The thing washed away in solutio  
was his last best answer  
from his previous transformation,  
dissolving that  
                                of which question  
                                is symptom.

The Roman answered.  
Anthony's last best, a Roman soldier.  
But the heat has softened the solder,  
Cleopatra flies, Ceasar conquers,  
Anthony empties, and rushing to fill the emptiness  
calls on his old Roman heart.

What is transcended must be, as  
Enobarbus tells us, kept –

what was defeated  
must not be thrown away.

After all, the Roman is no fool.  
So Anthony resolves to take the field again.  
Resolves, but no attempt can make solid  
what had begun to dissolve – and dies embossed  
in the loss  
of what he had begun.

## Abraham & Isaac's Mountain

Going to the mountain-top, for Abraham  
the way up was steep, sheer rock at times  
under the brilliant searing light of midafternoon.  
For Isaac, the way down took the rest of his life.

God will provide. So Abraham took the goat  
and stayed his knife. And Isaac left the land of Abimalech,  
and returning to his father's land, dug the wells  
his father did and gave them the names his father had.

To name success is to give the name of the Enemy  
unless success becomes the succeeding moment  
and happiness what happens – a failure, an attempt  
to name God, who is the only success and the deep enemy.

They flee, though no one pursue.

## Aeneas

Surrender –

turning away from the great temptation  
to perpetuate the old cycle.  
Death of vengeance,

the abundant passion  
once rejected supplies energy.

Conscious suffering stands up in a mob  
in the midst of a world disintegrating  
comes to maturity, accepts responsibility  
shuts the gates of war.

Self-control, then gradual assimilation  
then transformation.

Winning and losing are intimate  
in a dying and rising universe.

A few thousand years is very little time  
to reach across  
in the breasts of men and women  
who are capable.

Retelling restores the story  
to something a little more truthful.  
The hard facts contain no truth, only  
what we've done with those bones.



## Original Sin –

being that thing that we have in common,  
all humanity,  
is not an individual thing  
and has nothing to do with personal  
alienation. and redemption –  
being that thing that lies beyond us all,  
all human progress,  
has nothing to do with personal  
power. each speaks  
to the same thing  
– death

## Faith

Faith dwells in darkness  
moving over the face of the Deep  
Faith speaks "Thou" into the Unknown.  
Faith surrenders and comes to itself  
is not impelled; yet –  
    Thy will be done.  
Faith follows not after the truth  
    runs before;  
an unbarred gate swinging open  
onto a landscape unbounded.  
Faith must be done again anew each day  
no mere lazy inheritance  
received at the reading  
    of the Will.

A work that can do nothing  
that grace leaves undone.  
Faith is a living, not a having,  
puts one foot forth to step  
where no ground appears,  
creates that which it upholds,  
forms beneath the foot,  
comes up to meet it.

*We put out to sea in a storm while Jesus falls asleep,  
tossed on wind-foudered waves.  
What comes of us now? He sleeps.  
We run to wake Him but stop in awful fear:  
He climbs over the side of the boat,  
walks the water, holding his hand out to us,  
    God –  
    there  
shouting down the wind, heaving the seas.  
We needn't run waken the Divine; it is awake  
in the midst of the storm we most fear,  
the one that will strip us of who we are.  
It is we who sleep and suddenly cry out,  
realizing this isn't about personal salvation.  
The world is our concern.*

Living it heals and creates. Faith sees.  
Death, illness, aging, all  
beside the point it sees.

## Faith Helps Us Back into the Boat

Faith helps us back into the boat  
recrosses the inland sea  
and then forgives  
the sin of simply being.

Faith is no salve, but an expensive perfumed oil  
best spent anointing death.  
It is what we are called to do with death  
calling forth that which redeems.

We enter faith when, coming to the end  
we can go no further  
choosing the ground  
on which we rest  
trusting in what, so intimately known  
we know in the same way we know ourselves.

## Crucifixion

comes like a bloom to the dead  
land. the wounded king  
lay bleeding many years before the rose  
bloomed in the land; the rocks bled;  
the quest, the sacrifice, the passion  
were suffered; the trial by blood;  
                    and the land  
lay waste many years before,  
the land sickened with the old king  
and lay with him in a bed of shame,  
in gray destitution, in misery unhealed –  
all this  
                    before, many years  
before the crucifixion came  
like a breath of spring  
voiding the meaningless waste.

## *Give us this Day our Daily Bread*

The bread of tomorrow and of today,  
what is needed to go on – no more.

The bread that guards against the famine of God,  
the God on whom we feed, God feeding God.

Give enough for one day, and the next morning  
enough for that – to this we are called,  
that bread will be daily provided.

### *and Lead us not into Temptation*

but deliver us, spare us from that  
test we know we would not pass  
allow us instead to spare another –  
only that way, forgiveness rips through the heart.

## Putting Out to Sea in a Storm

Putting out to sea in a storm, our little boat,  
our few companions. *Midway this way of life*  
*we're bound upon* Jesus falls asleep.  
Having left the dead  
to bury the dead, we toss, wind-foundered.  
What comes of us now? He sleeps.  
Shake Him – our little faith.  
Listen instead with the ear of wind  
and upheaving waves. Listen,  
hear what they hear – God out there in the midst  
of the dark lake shouting down the wind,  
heaving the seas. No need to wake the Divine.  
It is the storm itself, the storm we fear  
will strip us of what we need to survive.  
But we must live on other bread and water  
now, the storm.

## Night Sea Journey in a Cooking Pot

the dark night  
the cloud of unknowing  
the tempest  
on the sea of the unconscious  
out on the sea of God  
out on the unknown alone  
the deeps suddenly  
heaving underfoot –  
the best we can do  
is not to provide ourselves  
with a small boat  
and hang on –  
these are the waters  
on which we find Jesus out walking,  
and blown sideways in the wild spray  
we must get out of the boat ourselves  
and walk the water too,  
grasping at a word  
that bids us to safety  
where we most fear to put our feet  
the abyss no longer hidden  
faith walks longing through the worst storm of all.

## Longing for Ground

*let us sit upon the ground  
and discuss the death of kings.*

*Richard II*

humus, the humility of the ground.  
longing for ground.  
ground, decomposition of living things.  
fertile ground, the ground of being.  
grounded, centered, at peace.  
stepping onto sacred ground, one  
removes one's shoes. we bow  
to the ground, no grounds  
to do otherwise. only the well-  
grounded know, only those in whose  
upbringing is their grounding,  
only those for whom the ground  
beneath their feet and the ground  
of their soul are common ground.



## The Grace of Fate

two sides of a coin –  
grace and fate.  
why is there suffering  
in an unjust world?  
it is this lottery  
of the gods  
and it is this sacrifice –  
to make holy  
to give over to the Gods  
to restore the primordial unity  
to put together again  
what was once whole  
and has been broken –  
this grace and this fate.

## Throwing Out Junk

Not the dogma not the scripture  
not the holy relics not the images  
not the crucifixion not the assumption  
not the resurrection not the annunciation –  
NOT this. Not the temple  
not the tabernacle not the muezzin  
not the church not the alter –  
nothing that is not lived.  
Not the Bible not the cross  
not the Lord's Prayer not the Virgin –  
none of these un-lived.  
God unfettered, God unimagined, God undocumented,  
God unorganized; ONLY God  
only walking before God,  
only saying Thou.