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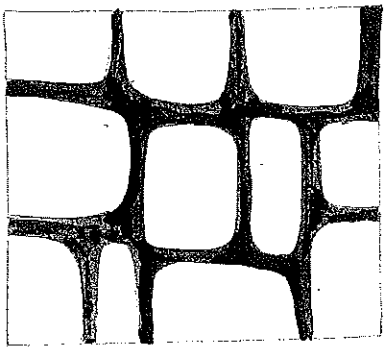
A Few Cells in the Great Hive

Reginald Gibbons

Someone asked me to suggest a reading list for a young American poet. Before I can suggest what anyone should read, I think I should ask what sort of reader I am, since preferences inevitably depend on temperament and formation. There are many simultaneously existing and developing kinds and genealogies of poetry in the world and within this country, and no set of readings can speak equally well to all practitioners of the art. Simonides is supposed to have said that the more bees there are bringing honey to the hive, the better. And I agree. So I think I am able to speak only to, and for, poets whose sense of things is already somewhat, or may turn out to be somewhat, like my own. Also, age has shown me that much of what I thought was still contemporary, and still very much believe to be valuable to anyone writing in our era, may already feel gone to many poets who are much younger than I. (In the short span of years from the middle 1500s to the early 1600s, and again from the late 1700s to the early 1800s, and once more from the years of World War I to the 1930s, English poetry changed very much, and didn't both poetry and the novel change greatly from about 1960 to about 2000, in many languages? Now, too, we can sense that since September 11, 2001, some of the imposed structures of our society are beginning to change in a particular way, and with them some of our ways of feeling and the acculturation of our spirits and our imagination will change. All this affects what we write and how we read.)

So what sort of reader am I? I discover the answer partly by looking at what sort of readers others are. To grasp how deeply writers younger than I might be affected by their formation in a later, media-saturated culture, has taken me a while, because their experience is so different from my own. And this difference continues to be shaped as we live on—I cannot guess how differently from me they may be affected by a new stage, in America, of a more militarized, more policed society. I matured as television did—which in any case I did not see so very much of, because when I wasn't in school, I was reading or making music with friends, and it was easy to be where TV was not, but young poets have matured in an environment of electronic media. I took the low production values of live TV for granted, and as a boy I watched the end of the period when improvising whirligigs like Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca risked the whole illusion of performance in front of the camera—and when they lost it, I don't think there was any irony in the moment, either for them or for us, only a kind of burst of released psychic energy and connection with them as performers. I watched the filmed horrors of attacks on civil rights demonstrators and of combat scenes in

Vietnam. I listened to music in "hi-fi," which went stereophonic for consumers during my teens, or on bad small radios or car radios, on little scratchy 45-rpm players, or occasionally in performance; while in college, I listened to music on speakers in my homemade cabinets—to the Stones and the Beatles and Dylan, when the energy of song seemed to me as creative and as intimate as it was rebellious—not staged in order to be filmed. It did seem then, as it apparently has not seemed since, to most Americans, till now, that a hard rain was going to fall. Now we can all hear music or a simulacrum of music reproduced with startling qualities of fidelity or with electronically exaggerated audio range, anywhere we want and in lots of places we don't want, as day in and day out we are forced to endure artificially saturated sound-spaces all around us, and songs that once burned with ardent dissatisfaction and idealism are melody lines for Muzak arrangements. I thought of film, too, as more capable of relatively intimate effects than it seems to be now—for me this meant old films by Cocteau and Chaplin and Keaton, it meant *Grand Illusion* and *Blue Angel* and *Nosferatu*, and it meant some of the French film noir, then early films by Fellini, Truffaut, Goddard, Rohmer and others; there weren't nearly as many films, altogether, as there are now, although then as now, Hollywood formed strong fantasies in young minds. (The substance of those fantasies was not so filled with explosions as now, nor were as many movies made for twelve-year-olds of all ages.) Classic foreign films were still circulating to provincial audiences for the first time; in all of Houston, where I grew up and where I returned from college for the first few summers after high school, only one theater—the seedy (but well air-conditioned) Alray—showed films by Fellini and Truffaut in the evenings, and by day it screened pornography.



All this experience of recorded music and of the images of film and television was not only an education in musical rhythms and in the pace and style of film and television, but also in language, which I'm sure had a decisive effect on me as a writer of poems. I was not lucky enough to grow up where there was strong speaking—telling of story, rich metaphor arising from everyday life, regional accents that were a form of resistance, instead of what I heard—a form of sociability and conformism. I listened to voices around me, but their way of speaking gave me little. I went to oddballs and foreigners and media from somewhere else to hear other ways of speaking. And I think that persons formed emotionally and culturally by more recent TV and film—and technically, such as by a pace

of cuts that I still have trouble catching up to—have understandably become accustomed to a very different linguistic environment and different ideals both true and false, both civilized and puerile, both noble and crass. Accustomed to a different sort standardization on the airwaves, which coopts non-mainstream language ways. Listeners to language who are younger than I have been educated in different linguistic environments and have learned different production values in media (which whether we're comfortable with this thought or not, are also human values), and I think they are steeped in an often ironic allusiveness in commercial mass culture ("intertextuality") that allows very few to take the risks of live, more improvised performance or more complicated language, or win for such risks the exhilarating payoffs for sheer human rather than technical virtuosity. All of this gives the poet some of the artistic assumptions that determine how she or he writes poems. I don't believe I am caught in a past—I believe I'm looking, actively scanning, both backwards in experience and forwards in hope or dread, when I work as a poet. But my particular personal history does affect how I write, what I write, and what I am recommending as reading for other poets. And my personal history is what orients me toward the unknown into which we are advancing, each day.

Perhaps the most telling of all my retrospective Personal Poetry Facts is that when I graduated from high school, and my two favorite English teachers jointly gave me a copy of T. S. Eliot's *Collected Poems* and another gave me Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading*, Eliot and Pound were still alive. Larger than life but at the same time somewhat marginalized by their obsolescence (after *Howl*, etc.) and, in Pound's case, perhaps senility, they were nevertheless living presences who still reminded me convincingly and constantly not so much of their own work but of their sense—as I understood it—of how poetic works were made: out of reading widely among works of the past in order to renovate the dulled or hollow present-day language (in every present—that of the modernists or our own), the routine language of ordinary description, emotional expression and ideas, the language of received opinion. To produce from older *literary* models (not necessarily canonical ones, and not very many models in the other arts) a revived freshness of language and especially of descriptive powers and technique. One applied that freshness to, and developed it out of, one's own perceiving, feeling, thinking, and one's own historical moment. I accepted their assumptions about how all this worked, for a poet, and then gradually I learned how to train my ear for language in present-day life and in contemporary literary works, especially the quirkier writers of fiction; and then, I tried to learn how to coax language out of the future, also.

I mostly assign readings to students in order to (1) push their sense of the timeline of poetry back a hundred or four hundred or 4,000 years, and (2) lead their awareness of poetry's infinitely various modes out beyond English. I

also assign or suggest readings in order to try to (3) instill an artistic value that to me seems important—that one writes poetry not only to convey something (a feeling, an idea, a way of speaking, a choice—however vaguely the poet apprehends it or longs for it, at first) but also to join an ongoing exploration in poetry not only of feeling and thought but also of language itself. When for many years I was the editor of a literary magazine, I put together each issue, whether of writers from the U.S. or elsewhere, thinking of my motto as, "It's a conversation."

"It" meant writing, reading, reading about writing, writing about writing and reading—a very intertextual kind of process. (Before there was the word "intertextuality," I think, and before there was the phrase "anxiety of influence," there was Walter Jackson Bate's lovely and illuminating little book of thirty years ago, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet.*) But I myself don't feel that *this* intertextuality is especially ironized, unlike so much intertextuality of film nowadays, and of poetry and fiction, too. Also, because I believe there are truths of lived experience, I don't much like the postmodern assumption that there are none. I'm not into "appropriating" scraps of mass culture (although true popular culture is filled with marvelous work). I don't see great value in stances of postmodern irony, nor in embracing the supposed emptiness of the "subject position." I am into appropriating anything and everything that leaves a trace of lived experience and human regard in language that resists the diction and rhythms and motives of "commercial speech"—because I believe one must with all one's artistic and human might resist the imposed artificialities of mass media (all forms), the outbreaks of ignorant "othering," and all forms of chauvinism—national, religious, regional, ethnic, etc. I think literary canons have value, and I favor a postmodern openness of multiple canons, without, I hope, any superciliousness on my part about any of them. I see the ideas of biological uniqueness and human capacity as the ground of human rights, the worth of the individual life and truth of individuality. The books I read and recommend have to do with all that, too.

Language is the common capacity and property of us all, yet it can be bent to a surprising and memorable blue note by the uniqueness of a line or a whole poem, and our use of it in poetry—so as to mark it as different in some way from its utilitarian use—offers us at least the possibility of an oblique (Emily Dickinson famously called it "slant") communication worth having. Language is serviceably functional among us all, yet it can lead into an vertiginous exhilaration of self-reflexiveness. Language is sometimes a game we all play, yet it reaches into our being with soul-shaking utterances of grief, love, pain, promise. Writing in general, and writing poetry specifically, is a conversation, a making of language into verse with others—"verse" meaning something shaped, made out of "language in the dimension of time" (Antonio Machado's definition of poet-

ry), and often labored over (which is itself an artistic value that has become precarious). Writing implies having in mind "others"—as sources (the voices one does hear), as models of other possibilities of being, as addressees, forebears, colleagues (dead and alive, looking over one's shoulder), distant listeners and imaginary interlocutors. Thus a Sterling Brown brings into his work models from both the blues and the English canon; thus a Derek Walcott grasps the King's English and turns it to a new use and sends it triumphantly back to the King's subjects. Thus a Paul Celan immerses himself in the language of the murderers of his family and a million families, and turns it back toward the expression of humane feeling. Thus an Aimé Césaire transforms surreal French, or César Vallejo Andeanizes Spanish. Yes, it's all so complicated, in those moments of listening, of hearing, of seeing the traces, of realizing that a feeling is opening up, of finding some first words, or final ones.

A last bit of background to my recommendations: as I have already implied, I believe that our faculty or instinct of language, as Stephen Pinker calls it, is astounding for its usefulness and complexity, inventiveness, reliability despite inevitable confusion, and for the pleasure it makes possible in the creation of language-objects like poems and novels. The use of language is also an implicating process, though—for we register incomparably (even when unwilling) a multitude of feelings and ideas arising ceaselessly in our own unconscious processes (personal and cultural). In our writing we do record—whether or not we wish to, or pay attention to this recording, or make anything out of it—much that comes to voice *through* us impersonally *from* our culture, *as well as* from our deep personal, individual experience of the intimate relations, successful or failed, loving or brutal, of our families-of-origin and mates and children, and of our power relations to our fellows, nearby and remote, similar and dissimilar. We bring to the page much more than we can manage to make the most of. And some of what we bring is from our playing around in, and serious wrestling with, language itself.

Then the questions for each poet are, what sort of poem do *I* want to write? And how have *I* come to feel that I want to write *that* sort of poem? Or why is it *I* who want to write it?

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(1) Because I think the *sound* of language in the poem is one element that is essential to distinguish it from other uses of language, I would begin my suggestions with some ear training—a kind of solfeggio of language, although it's nowhere near as clearly structured as it is in music. I would listen to the short poems of the English Renaissance, with attention to the differences between the poets of the plain style (like Ben Jonson and Sir Walter Ralegh) and those (like Sir Philip Sydney and Edmund Spenser) who favored Italianate ornament and rhetoric. Almost any big anthology would do, but there's an especially rich selection of the period in which the iambic rhythms of English and of poet-

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ry that we hear were first being heard and artistically deployed, in Emrys Jones, *The New Oxford Book of Sixteenth Century Verse*. And I would listen to the syntax in *Paradise Lost*.

One critical guide I might recommend is a long essay by Yvor Winters, "Aspects of the Short Poem in the English Renaissance," in his *Forms of Discovery* (1967). Winters was notoriously cantankerous when judging modern poetry, but for poets he was a useful guide to the Renaissance, once you make allowances for his narrow preference for poems that versify a moral argument. He had a great ear, so he was a very good guide to scansion, too. And without hearing the rhythms of the Renaissance, a poet can't hear what was done to those rhythms by the artistic choices of the prodigious Shakespeare, then John Donne and John Milton, then the eighteenth-century poets, then the Romantics and Victorians. True, poetry in English gained the free-verse resources of the King James Bible and the democratic impulses (in line and diction and structure) of Walt Whitman, the abbreviated, sometimes syncopated hymn rhythms and mind-Möbius strips of Emily Dickinson, and the prose poems of Charles Baudelaire and the very different sorts of rhythmic (and artistic) freedom discovered or created by Arthur Rimbaud and Stéphane Mallarmé. But English is still an iambic language, just as it was in 1590 or so.

Poetry in English also took a rhythmical path that goes eventually through the metrical practices of William Butler Yeats and the free verse of Ezra Pound. This free verse is especially keen to represent vivid sense perception, to make use of the incomplete, the fragmented. At first, this path leads to a freely lineated iambic verse; later it arrives at a mostly free verse using some of the small-scale metrical devices of iambic verse. Soon H.D., Mina Loy, Williams Carlos Williams and others were writing true free verse, leaving metrical echoes behind. But others continued to write metrical poetry—again, I would look for the richness of variety rather than the confusion of sometimes heated differences in any historical moment when many kinds of poetry are being written.

Later, after the American poets who began publishing around 1950 broke yet again with the inherited traditions of metrical verse and went to their own true free verse—rather scant on speech stresses, sometimes, with scarcely anything of a metrical ghost in it (like the post-metrical writing of James Wright, Adrienne Rich, W.S. Merwin and others), the sense of writing free verse as a way of going *against* another insistent rhythm (iambic) seems to have gradually drained out of American poets' sense of rhythm. While the English *language* continues to be thoroughly iambic, one historical irony in the art of poetry is that, because the feeling of free verse as a fresh *counter*-rhythm is gone, many free-verse poets today write very flat language that has very little rhythmic energy at all; meanwhile they and many others can end up falling unwittingly *into* iambic rhythms without seeming to

have even heard them, for they often leave these iambic passages trotting regularly along for several lines, amidst other lines (and rhythms) that are free, instead of choosing *either* to use those iambic rhythms deliberately *or* deliberately to avoid them. But one can still train one's ear to hear linguistic rhythm, by reading aloud the kinds of poetry I am mentioning, and moving from the rhythmic discoveries of the late 1500s by steps and stages all the way to the highly deliberate, repeated reinvention of free-verse rhythms by William Carlos Williams—in both what we might call his impersonal free verse in *Spring and All* (the complete version, including both prose and poetry, in his *Collected Poems*) and in *Paterson*, and in his personal free verse (his many short poems).

In twentieth-century poetry in English there is every conceivable model of how to achieve expressiveness with the sounds of language, from Robert Frost's colloquial yet decorous, smooth yet by no means tame, use of meter, to the verbal collages of Ezra Pound (reinvented for new purposes by Gary Snyder or Charles Wright, for example) and the very precisely prosy rhythms of Marianne Moore; from Wallace Stevens' highly guarded and brilliantly disguised feeling tones to John Ashbery's chatty refusals to "make sense;" from H.D.'s sometimes icy couplets to C. K. Williams's warm, capacious contours of thought-working-itself-out; from Allen Ginsburg's pelting pantomorphic metaphors to Geoffrey Hill's grave nearly impacted compression of polysemous meaning-making; from Kenneth Fearing's or Louis MacNeice's openhearted, fast-paced ironies (ironies of pain, vulnerability, and sheer intelligence rather than of the condescension that rots so many later ironists) to the cool tone of a performed casualness in the poems of Elizabeth Bishop or the measured elegance of perception and expression of Seamus Heaney; from the slow deliberate movement, packed with speech stresses, of Basil Bunting to the helter-skelter diction of our contemporaries Campbell McGrath or Dean Young or others of similar almost bebop swiftness or surreality; from the calm, meditative pace of late poems by James Wright to the agitated but melodious ballads and blues of Sterling A. Brown; from the word-cracking of Heather McHugh to the very different but equally inventive meaning-doubling line-breaks and blues beat of Sterling Plumpp. This list could be expanded *enormously*. I am only trying to suggest a moderate amount of the available *range* of attempts to create particular sounds of language. The best single anthology of modern American poetry of which I know is Hayden Carruth's *The Voice That Is Great Within Us*—best because it keeps alive so many relatively recent sounds of the language not found in other anthologies any more, and because it includes excellent poets whose work seems to have been abandoned by far too many readers, especially poets themselves. This anthology is a sampling of the sounds of poetry in American English, but for a comprehensive survey one needs supplements like

Arna Bontemps' early anthology of *Negro Poetry* and also a collection like *Every Shut Eye Ain't Sleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African-Americans since 1945*, edited by Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton. And some examples from black American poets working inside print-culture rather than performance aesthetics, like Ed Roberson and Nate Mackey.

(2) Why spend so much time on the sound of it all, someone will ask, when it's about "images" and feelings and moves of the psyche? You might say that since we—unlike Shakespeare or Coleridge or Dickinson or Yeats—live in an overwhelmingly image-saturated culture (images false and true, unreal and real, images spun with ulterior motives or raw with news value or both at once), shouldn't poetry get hold of some of that? Poetry is words, though, and is not, strictly speaking, visual images, even though it creates what we call mental images. It seems to me that a poet tries to do in a poem, with language, things that visual images can't do. It's true that there are "images" only conceivable in language—the French surrealists were the first to try deliberately to articulate "primary process thinking," as Freud called it in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and the first to give central importance to mental images contrary to reality, although such images can be found even in ancient works, even if not so frequently. So yes, there is indeed something worth hunting down that is not *sound*. But many photos are faked, visual aids (as well as verbal ones) are fake in intent, what we see in nature, to say nothing of culture, is deceptive, too, and even what dreams and automatic writing give us is in fact an already *censored* access to the unconscious. Since we swim amidst innumerable visual images of indecipherable or dubious validity, we can resist perhaps by reading poetry for metaphor and image that belong to unfamiliar life-worlds, so that we can try to stand briefly outside our own. I mean the imagery of the ancient Greek tragedies, of oral poetry (ancient or modern, e.g., Homeric or Zulu), of cultures not yet industrialized but making use of the book. Even limiting oneself to English, this means poetry from outside the mainstreams of England, Ireland, the U.S. and Canada. One picks the texts that might answer a whispered question in one's own psyche.

(3) Why, for that matter, did surrealism take so long to catch fire in English? Why does much of its imagery feel forced or superficial rather than profound? There's no forcing—of this kind, at least—in the Spanish-language surrealists, as Robert Bly pointed out many years ago: in Federico García Lorca, César Vallejo (who did torque the language itself, mightily) and Pablo Neruda, for instance. I think something got in the way of surrealism in English (in the U.S. and in Great Britain) because of Anglo-American pragmatism—I mean not the formal philosophy but a habit of being—and because of customary repression of some kinds of feeling (even among poets, who like all artists live by conventions within the art, however much some of them may flout social conventions outside it). So to me, at this late date in the history of

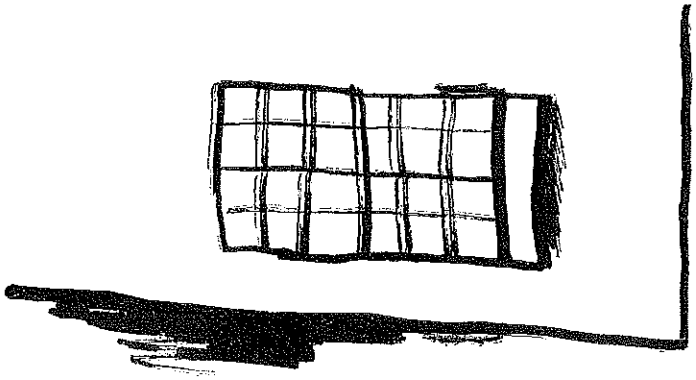
studying the psyche, it seems that the next crucial ingredient of the inevitably elusive recipe for poetry is training one's ear and eye to read one's own work for the sake of finding in it the touches, traces, moves, preoccupations, obsessions, that have entered one's draft from the unconsciousness rather than from the poet's inevitably rather limited conscious intentions—whether these are "images," expressive sounds and syntax, or aspects of structure. We look for what gives away, in its awkwardness, an attempt to get hold of what doesn't want to be got hold of—the very thing we want. The excitement of moves or turns of psyche or feeling in the poem will then be expressive of movement in the unconscious as well as the conscious mind (good-bye, Yvor Winters!). That is, expressive of the lived experience of fleeting, self-contradictory, elusive feeling. And of the lived experience of the familiar, incomprehensible, fascinating affection and violence, creativity and destructive rage, of which the human being is capable.

And by unconscious I don't mean only the most private feelings of intimate desire, but everything, especially all that habituated responsiveness in us to the mainstream mass culture and electronic media that constantly saturate the thought-world of sales and marketing and political masquerade. When I write a poem, to what degree does it confirm, or fail to disagree with, the publicly reinforced attitude—which since Sept. 11, 2001 we have seen revealed more clearly—that since we (well, some of us) are (were) OK, then isn't the world OK, too? It is not OK. It is beautiful and horrible. When I write a poem, to what degree does it confirm, or fail to disagree with, the established habit of feeling that my particular decisions about my own life can be made without reference to much else besides consumer product availability and whether I feel "happy" or not?

But yes, most obviously, I suppose, the unconscious will add into the poem, will finally make visible, for those who have eyes to see, those intimate, more private preoccupations of the poet that otherwise would have remained behind the impenetrable screen between our conscious awareness and our unconscious thought and feeling. For example: I read over another poet's typescript to give him some responses to its shape as a book, and I happened to notice that half a dozen poems ended with the *image* of the human hand. Of this, the poet seemed not to have been aware. I did not suggest that all the poems be tinkered with solely to get rid of what could seem repetitious, but instead that the poet try to trace the path of that hand, so to speak, back to its origins in his memory and feelings, in order to try to see in which of those half dozen poems the hand was truly important, and in which it was simply his own personal gesture, made toward himself, as if to remind himself of something that he already knew he had strong feelings about. As when getting a sense of how American one is by going abroad, one could look for some vantage point from which to see what in one's poem may be typical of one's

particular Americanness in addition to, or rather than, being individually expressive. What if what I have taken for my own isn't "my" own, in part? And to what extent might it represent what psychoanalysis calls a "consensual object"—the result of my trying to please others whose demands and expectations I carry around with me in my attitudes and habits of feeling? And which of those demands and expectations bring out what I hope will be brought out, in myself, and which only return me to old ideas? I am assuming a willingness in the poet, in fact an appetite, which not everyone has, to see oneself as working with all of one's psyche, not just the manageable part (but I would not want to romanticize the unmanageable part!). I think it's essential to bring more of one's own formation to consciousness; to ponder—given who one is and where and who and what one came from and where one wants to go, in every sense—what it is that one wants to write. And why. Not so much in order to "get ideas for poems," but simply in order to prepare the mind and the ear for writing.

(The unconscious content might be an idea, an image, a counter-feeling, a rhythm or a structural device—one could find one's own techniques of revision that would make it more possible to come at any of these, and other things, as well. Catching hold of some of the unconscious content of the draft is something that the great writers seem to do without nearly as much trouble as the rest of us have. I am certain there is some gift of self-transparency of intuition in them, even if they may say or think in their conscious minds that their creative process is otherwise. This intuitive gift is apparent in poets as different as D.H. Lawrence and Rainer Maria Rilke, Paul Celan and Marina Tsvetaeva, Antonio Machado and Nazim Hikmet, but it's not limited to twentieth-century writers—it fills Shakespeare's plays and sonnets, too. Apropos the French surrealists I mentioned above: as Freud pointed out, dreams and free association are already altered (by "secondary revision"); they can't really reveal directly something within us; they are only clues. So I am not suggesting that we transcribe dreams and call the transcriptions poems, thinking they are somehow more honest, but that we ponder, in the same way as dreams, the drafts of poems. In their verbal swervings—approaches and evasions—we can hope to catch a trace of something: that vague feeling-idea that lies behind what we *thought* we were doing. Then the



trace can be pursued further, and it will reveal another trace. The poet becomes an internal tracker. Christopher Bollas's psychoanalytical book *Cracking Up* seems to me a remarkable exploration of the work of the waking unconscious. And in fact I recommend all his books.)

A painter will turn a work in progress upside down and study it. And as I mentioned, there are devices of composition, or rather of revision, that many poets use, and teach in workshops, for turning the draft of the poem in such a way that one can see something in it that had not been visible before, such as experimentally or provisionally altering points of view, lines, rhythms, and structure; making lists of the sorts of things that are in the poem(s); looking for the boundaries between those sections of the poem (from a phrase to a large block) that are the steps the poem takes, through turns of feeling, subject, narration, voice, image, metaphor, etc. (so as to consider the proportions of the sections to each other, and the order of the steps). And then the truly surprising power of focus of both conscious and unconscious mind, holding ready at the same time a hundred different figures, feelings, choices of diction, etc., can do its work.

So the issue here is—the poet's reading list has to include the poet's own poems (both finished and in progress). But the poet has to read them for what she or he did not already know is in them. Which is not easy.

(4) The next issue for the poet is how to situate his or her own artistic goals—which don't have to be especially clear, but do have to be recognized, felt, as truly pressing. There are some books that *model* this. In Hayden Carruth's *Selected Essays and Reviews* we can see a bracingly learned but anti-academic and independent response to contemporary writing. Unorthodox and brilliant, Carruth retraces his own path through the great contemporary changes in American poetry. By contrast, the French writer and theorist Hélène Cixous, in *Rootprints* and also in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, gives us a very different but also exemplary mode of self-scrutiny, as well as philosophical speculation on the ultimate location of the impulse to write; and a caution not to take for granted our straight-ahead narrating of this and that while not allowing ourselves to think through and to feel what the language itself is doing, while we are writing. She is a good corrective to the American foibles of either wanting to read nice books or wanting to slum in easy lowlife downhill escapades (which is the same impulse, in opposite manifestations, I think), rather than wanting to confront books whose honesty and doubt shake us more deeply (Among her favored writers are Franz Kafka, Clarice Lispector, Jean Genet, and Thomas Bernhard—all of whom I too think are able to break the frozen sea within us, as Kafka said a great book should do. To her favorites of the sea-breaking kind, here I would a few of my own: stories and diaries of Isaac Babel; Edwin Muir's *The Story and the Fable*; William Goyen's *The House of Breath*; and Thomas McGrath's *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*.)

(5) Then there is the idea of vocation. I have been told that the German writer Gerhard Falkner has written a book about the saving resistance of poetry to commodification, the title of which in English would be *The Worthlessness of Poetry*. True, poets can trade on renown, get teaching jobs on the basis of their publications, and even sell, in a few cases, many books, but the rule for most poets is mostly that the making of poems has to be its own reward. And the making of poems requires stamina over years. I was especially interested in the question or problem of vocation when I collected the poets' essays in *The Poet's Work* (1979). Some poets continue to write about it, from Adrienne Rich in *What Is Found There*, a published journal of responses to artistic and political issues, to Geoffrey Hill in *The Enemy's Country*, a very densely argued series of lectures on poetry's use of language and its nearly (nearly) inextricable ties to commercial or instrumental speech and writing.

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I said I wanted to send students back as far as 4,000 years and out beyond poetic practice in English. How do we go there? The vehicle for such time-travel is the poem itself—our encounter, necessarily through translations, with the metaphor and other tropes, allegory, narration, poetic forms, etc., in epics, in Greek plays, Native American myths, hymns and prayers, and those of the Rigveda, lyrics of the T'ang dynasty, Bessie Smith's blues lyrics, and so on. I especially recommend one astonishing work of scholarship: Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics*. This is a massive, analytical compendium which we poet-readers can study as a trove of hundreds of examples of the earliest known poetic texts in the family of languages in use from Celtic Ireland to ancient South Asia known as "Indo-European;" Watkins describes many poetic devices apparently invented hundred and even thousands of years before there was writing, some of which we are still using. No less interesting is his distillation of the core poetic themes of the most ancient poetry still available to us by example and conjecture. Wouldn't it be interesting for us, in trying to understand what it is that comes through us, as distinct from what it is we create, to consider "the totality of themes" in our work, and then in the work of all our contemporaries taken together? Watkins says, "the totality of themes may be thought of as the culture of the given society." What are the major themes of American society? Where do I position myself amidst or against those themes, as I write?

Also for dipping into rather than necessarily reading straight through, is the hoard of statements in T.V.F. Brogan, *English Versification, 1570-1980: A Reference Guide with Appendix*, an annotated bibliography of every known text by poets in English on the rhythms of poetry.

In addition to the writers and specific books I have mentioned above, I will recommend a few other favorite books by writers of the past and by our

contemporaries, for stretching or refining one's sense of language, of poetry, of artistic possibility: James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*; Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*; Thomas Bernhard, *Gathering Evidence*; Gwendolyn Brooks, *A Street in Bronzeville*; Sterling A. Brown, *Southern Road*; Stanley Burnshaw, *The Poem Itself*; Albert Camus, *The First Man* (it is fascinating to watch as one reads this unfinished book how his artistic project changes as he goes further into the draft); Donald Davie, *Articulate Energy*; W.S. Di Piero, *Shooting the Works*; Robert Duncan, *Selected Poems* ; Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*; Euripides, *Bakkhai* (may I be forgiven for recommending my own translation); Allen Ginsburg, *Howl* (the facsimile edition); William Goyen, in addition to his *The House of Breath*, his collection of stories, *Had I A Hundred Mouths*; Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry*; Danilo Kis, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* and *Hourglass*; Lawrence Lipking, *The Life of the Poet*; Thomas McGrath, in addition to his *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, also his *Collected Poems* and *Thomas McGrath: Life and the Poem*, edited by Reginald Gibbons and Terrence Des Pres; Czeslaw Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry* and his poems; Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, translated by Donald Frame; Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory and The Gift*; Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*; Octavio Paz, especially his essays, such as *Convergences*; Katherine Anne Porter, "*Pale Horse, Pale Rider*"; Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way* (especially the first 40 or so pages, read very slowly; poems of Rumi; poems of Nazim Hikmet; Adrienne Rich, in addition to her *What Is Found There*, also *An Atlas of the Difficult World*; Joseph Roth, *The Radetzsky March* (in the translation by Joachim Neugroschel); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*; Muriel Rukeyser, *Out of Silence*; Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles*; W.G. Sebald, *The Emigrants* and *The Rings of Saturn*; Charles Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus*; Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died*; Wislawa Szymborska, *View with a Grain of Sand*; Patrick White, *The Tree of Man*; *A Fringe of Leaves*; and *The Solid Mandala* (well—all of them, if you have a taste for them); Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* and *Keywords*; George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*; Richard Wright, *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*. Two recent large anthologies achieve some redress of the omissions of more mainstream editors: Cary Nelson, *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (Oxford, 2000) and Keith Tuma, *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry* (Oxford, 2001). The sixth edition (1993) of M.H. Abrams' invaluable *A Glossary of Literary Terms* also has a useful section summarizing some critical theories and methodologies used in academic literary studies.