

ONE ART: “NEITHER OUT FAR
NOR IN DEEP”—
25 WORKSHOPPING *ESSAIS*
TO A MAKER’S MARK

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*“Master Li had a phrase he didn’t want to express in words,
So with light ink, he sketched out a soundless poem.”*
—Hunag, T’ing-chien

“. . . if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a Tree it had better not come at all.”
—Keats

I

Undergraduate and graduate creative writing students pursuing a BA, BFA, MA, or MFA degree in poetics and prosody, linguistics and literatures at national universities usually inquire at some point during their program about codified guidelines or precepts (*vide*: wish-fulfillments) to render the difficulties of writing “imaginatively,” of making something from nothing, or, at best, from very little, less arduous, to take the trauma out of the drama of creativity—so to speak. We professionals, too, long for the purity and innocence at the heart of instant karma, innately crave the same potent elixir of the Greek seers “inspired” by the “third degree of madness, of which,” we are told, “the Muses are the source” (Plato 57), the same psychic Philosopher’s Stone effecting “a fine frenzy,” however much we prate about the process of writing, its coming-to-be, the primary and secondary imaginations, the beauty of beholding Henry James’s elaborate “oriental rug” being laid bare, unveiled, on the bare floor as a “fiction,” any fiction, a “supreme fiction,” of form following function, of how the writing tells us what we really want to say—like Picasso’s *fin-de-siècle* Blue Period paintings, the chthonic ones, rarified and refined, ever so delicately, by “Antarctic light,” the ones we all want, the ones that, or so *el maestro* intimated, “painted themselves.”

The *essais*, “attempts,” “tries,” offered below are no panacea for pedagogues to profess by or practitioners to compose alliteratively by, but simply reflect an earnest attempt, based on the raw experience of facilitating graduate and undergraduate creative writing sessions, to provide, however cautiously, a service for novitiates who already know these things as they practice their craft, deeply immersed as they are in the creative process, sometimes without really knowing it, an often painful,

lonely, and mostly solitary (but mostly always rewarding, even considering its redundant Not-Mes), vocation or avocation as amateurs coming-to-be professionals, of trying to relearn and resurrect what is already rooted within and so make private public. Their “triggering town”[s], like our own, must “issue forth a light from within,” a “light within light,” Roethke queries rhetorically, swingers of birches that we are between the sublime and the sensate, provoked by sense and sensuousness, care and craft, the cunning intelligence of the sullen artificer searching for Byzantium and “gold enameling,” Jung’s “God within.” “To learn something,” Zen master Shunryu Suzuki (sounding like Socrates to Ion) reminds novitiates in his commentary on “Attachment, Non-Attachment,” “is not to acquire something which you did not know before. You know something before you learn it” (*Zen Mind: Beginner’s Mind* 120). Or, in Heidegger’s pre-mystical *Being and Time* prose *koan*: “Every inquiry is a seeking. Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought” (Trans. Macquarrie & Robinson 24). A “try” by any other name is still an *essai*. The best poem (Picasso *redux*) is always “the next one.”

Experienced and beginning professionals may propose, embellish upon, and share their own tries, question those offered here, reject others at variance with their teaching-writing experience or philosophy, reinvent a less formal set of criteria for the poetic-fictive posses of, perhaps, an even starker millennium, or, reject the whole out-of-hand as another entropic empirical gesture to “render the invisible visible” (to borrow from Thoreau, and Klee, in artful tandem), to disavow any knowledge of the whole as antiquated Romantic musing, a “dead Father” lugged around like conventional, plausible fiction or “readable” *vers libre ou verse formel*, even allow it to implode spontaneously, self-destruct on its own terms. Yet there is still enough Lawrentian “love left over” for the man or woman “coming through” into his own her own to leave the arcane process intact (Coleridge *claims he does* in “Kubla Khan”) as the only fast-passing magic left in an cyberspatial, hyperlinked world of images devoid of *mysterium tremendum*.

II

1. Read everything. In all tongues. Or acknowledged translations. Or at least try to: The Good, The Bad, The Underwhelming/The Undervalued, All Texts Great and Small, especially The Clichèd. Milton inferred most of that. “Love the words. Learn to love the words.” Dylan Thomas wrote that. We analyze, render judgments, philosophize about, comparatively and contrastively. What we canonize, deem good or relevant, maps of past misreadings we measure by their puerile opposite.

2. Try to put yourself in a position to write something, anything, fresh *by hand*, on a regular basis so as to keep oiled, by observing carefully, reading, cultivating sensory and emotive antennae—even if it is just your own name newly indited. For starters, the hand is more intimate than the computer or typewriter key. Save typed text for what you think are beginning drafts. (Even the most finely tuned engines need to be turned-over once-a-day in iccold weather for maximum efficiency.)

3. Try keeping a daybook, notebook, or journal about sensate things, what you see, hear, touch, read deeply into, or earth or art images that strike you, bits of dialogue, lines from texts that move, excite, or even bore you, the tenor of the day, dreams and fantasies, the world in which you are alive. *Now*. Now is the best time for anything. Emerson advocated probing “the miracle in the common,” the “everydayness” often overlooked in our daily lives. That involves keeping at least one innocent eye even into adulthood. As in Charles Simic’s evocative lyric, “POEM”:

Every morning I forget how it is.
 I watch the smoke mount
 In great strides above the city.
 I belong to no one.

Then I remember my shoes,
 How I have to put them on,
 How bending over to tie them up
 I will look into the earth.

4. Probe your interiority. The tree that would grow stronger, writes Nietzsche, must put its roots down more deeply. You create and live your reality. That subjectivity is buttressed, for better or worse, by your acculturation, education, family (or lack of), love (or lack of), genetics, economics, language, social and political persuasions, left or right brain cognition, sexual orientation, the list is limitless. Even if “The world is ugly./And the people are sad,” Stevens philosophizes in “Gubbinal,” “Have it your way.”

5. Under Hart Crane’s austere cold “Antarctic light,” try reassessing that compelling effusion you wrote perhaps the night before. Then see if it rings true. Coleridge did in his verse-letter (and all-too personally maudlin) early drafts to Sara Hutchinson, with whom he was hopelessly in love. After many revisions the drafts became poem, became the eight strophes of *Dejection: An Ode*, became ultimately both personal *and* universal.

6. In an electronic world of constant noise, psychobabble, of intellectual slumming for street-slang cred, of instant portable mediums vying for our attention from chat shows to interactive games, try to find some time to be alone each day. Make it a point to reserve this quiet time to read, reflect, meditate, simply be more quiet than you otherwise might be around others, visit other locales, just hang-out with yourself. Then try not to become a *poseur*, talking the artful talk, but learning to walk (*vide*: “work”) the more arduous artful walk.

7. Try to craft writing from some experiential reference, from *your* view of the world, rather than musing or abstracting about GRANDIOSE and OVER-ARCHING concepts. “Go in fear of abstraction,” Pound writes (“A Few Don’ts from an Imagiste”). Critical and philosophical thinking is important; try not to make what you say sound so important that it subsumes what a poem is all about. “Make some muscle/in your head,” Amiri Baraka cautions in “Young Soul,” “but/use the muscle/in yr heart.”

8. Try to engage in some “risky business” when you start to feel comfortable, complacent, with your work. Do dumb things with it—with language or form, even if you never employ or implement those changes, strategies, or techniques in your final version. To start, try *not* writing in formal paragraphs, *not* writing in neat calligraphic script in your journal. Sculpt different visual “Types of shape” as George Herbert (and later, John Hollander) did. Listen to new and different music, different voices, venture into museums, hang wherever *elsewhere is not*. “Direct your eye right inward,” Thoreau urges, “and be/Expert in home-cosmography” (*Walden: or, Life in the Woods*).

9. Try overwriting early drafts; you can always edit-out, but may not always remember that sharp image or incisive word or phrase you deposited in your brain before dropping into a REM state

and forgot to write out, however badly, somewhere, in the middle of the night. Keep a small tape-recorder beside your bed. Less expensively, leave an old-fashioned steno-pad there as an overt reminder that *your business* never sleeps—24/7/365.

10. Try to become your own final editor—no matter how often you seek others' opinions or workshop drafts in common. Ultimately, you are responsible for what you want to make public. Revise, revise, *but not unto death*. Bad editing, after all, is murder by dissection. Above all, be more than a little ruthless. "The test of great writing," Hemingway was wont to write time and again, "is how much good stuff you can throw away." A little understatement goes a long exaggerated way.

11. Try to monitor every aspect of your own writing, typing, editing, printing—the whole process of composing—in order to sensitize you to all of the various aspects of drafting a work from potency to act. This, in a sense, is your baby; learn to carry it to term yourself. (Sidebar: After you become ACCLAIMED, your grad assistant can tote the load.) In that way, you become even more intimate even with the shapes and textures of keyboard letters, the subtle musical or dissonant tones that sometimes elude us if we fail to become intimate with language, the covert tactics of the tongue.

12. Try typing, then printing, drafts after each handwritten effort. Words look differently on monitors and on typed sheets than they do when handwritten. They are colder. Harder. Mistakes are more easily editable, potential changes made more obvious. Words—even individual letters and sounds—take on different shades and contours, assonance and consonance can be *seen and heard* better in objective print, one remove from the hand.

13. Try making a prose gloss—a paraphrase or summary—of poems coming-to-be that even you, its "onlie begetter," cannot even fathom. With his more difficult late verse, Yeats composed glosses explaining what he thought the particularly troublesome, perhaps anagogic, "Crazy Jane" or "Tower" poem was trying to say. Upon revision, he then let the poem finish saying what it was after, after all, as Picasso let the paint explain what it sought. Sentences: Their Latinate radical—*sententiae*, great sentences that feel, perceive, realize, in a word, wisdom.

14. Try not to moralize. Poetry is not homiletic. Do not impose personal ethical or moral value judgments of your work on others or mandate a position on economic, environmental, political, social concerns. Such works may resound in the popular ear for a time, but usually never remain timeless. The traditional creative and critical impulse for an authentic moral center with the poet-as-priest or *vates* gave way to a pedantic, elegant, always representational, soporific, sentimental moralizing in the 18th and 19th Centuries. Modernity and postmodernity offer a different artistic vision as articulated in Charles Wright's consciously monotonous flat, declarative sentences.

The New Poem

It will not resemble the sea.
 It will not have dirt on its thick hands
 It will not be part of the weather.
 It will not reveal its name.
 It will not have dreams you can count on.
 It will not be photogenic.

It will not attend our sorrow.
 It will not console our children.
 It will not be able to help us.

15. Try to use language *via* the *via negativa*, avoiding cliché, banality, soporific sentimentality, well-worn platitudes of private and public discourse that, ironically, in the Age of Communication, murder the very offspring (language) they so assiduously dissect, daily, hourly. The Imagistic dictum still holds true: “Make it new!”

16. Try to hear writing aloud. Read your work to the ear first. It’s the best test of what rings false in writing. Perhaps like Robert Bly, James Wright, and others, commit your drafts to memory. Instead of listening to the cd, MP3, iPod, or XSM/Sirius in the car, voice aloud your work on long trips. The rhythm of the road makes for a near-perfect fusion of sound and sense. (It’s also fertile ground for fresh creative inspiration.)

17. Try not to feel inadequate when nothing comes. Nothing comes a lot more often than does something. Nothing presumes a *something* there waiting for formal expression. It’s not a void or a black hole; it may just be a temporary pause, a lull, before a storm. Be patient. Exercise the saint’s and mystic’s waking virtue: Waiting. One constantly writes *stuff* that ends up “in a drawer.” One writes *dreck* more often than one does something solid. Out of *refuse*, that is, *what is refused*, however, can come one image or bit of dialogue that later becomes a triggering town for the real thing. False labors are important to success. Inspiration—breathing life into—that inchoate urge to order what is formless, shapeless, without contours or boundaries—is not just anybody’s business. It is the frustrating business we understand all too well. Absence is the shape art (even human life) lives by—the invisible coming-to-be visible. Better and better writers inherit bigger and bigger frustrations. “I will take with me the emptiness of my hands/What you do not have you find everywhere,” Merwin croons in “Provision.”

18. Try not getting too big for your writing britches. Cautions my “breathtakingly levelheaded” mother. Even when she’s not there. Again and again. And ever again.

19. Try never beginning any inclass or informal workshopping remark about another’s work with the off-putting and a- or- uncritical, “I like it,” that often stifles rather than stimulates discussion. (We may all like the work, but hold that comment in abeyance—for the later cocktail hour.) One might as well draw a happy face, say, “Have a nice day.” Like modifying a car engine, criticism breaks an artifact down, in the root sense, into its constituent parts. “Criticism,” Eliot never fails to remind us, “is as inevitable as breathing” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent”).

20. Try to remember Mary Oliver’s *mantra* after you’ve browbeaten a poem into submission: “. . . and, when the time comes/to let it go,/to let it go.” And then add Rita Dove’s when you thought all along you knew where you were going in that “dark wood”: “You start out with one thing, end/up with another, and nothing’s/like it used to be, not even the future.” (“In Blackwater Woods”; “The Yellow House on the Corner,” respectively).

21. Try to remember why you’re doing what you’re doing. If you hate it, if you hate quiescence, if you hate your own life, and others’, if Melvillean “Dollars damn [you],” if your sexual-social-political life hasn’t improved as you thought it would, if mystery and inconclusive endings just don’t satisfy the soul as finalities do, if you don’t like discovering lost things, or getting lost, sometimes, or getting lost-and-found in dark places lots of times, or being acquainted with the night

even at noon, if what you profess hasn't made you one whit happier, saner, less sullen, more gregarious, more wistful, as you expected (as do your sublime images of foggy nights, your London Fog™ Mac collar upturned, walking furtively across the moors or overlooking the white cliffs of Dover, smoking an unfiltered [skyblue-shorts package] *Gauloise*), if patience is not part of your calling, if this hard-nosed business of *making* isn't as "poetic" enough for you as a made-for-tv special or feature-length biopic of the trenchantly sensitive, misunderstood artist, *fin-de-sieclè* poseur aesthete, artiste *manqué*, artiste *maudit*, Aschenbach desperately seeking Tadzio, in a word, if "making" sounds much too artisan-like, in a word, "If you can bring nothing to this place/but your carcass, get out!" (Carlos Williams, "Dedication for a Plot of Ground") Say amen, somebody!

22. Try finding just *one* of the many things in life you've forgotten or lost then ("Write it!").
"The art of losing isn't hard to master."

23. With Rilke, try never forgetting: "You must change your life" ("Archaic Torso of Apollo").
Gesang ist Dasein. Doing. Making. Discovering *Ch'i*.

24. Try "Simplicity. Simplicity. Simplicity." Know you have several more lives to live each day (Write them!) that need no meaning.

"Nothing is better than to live
a storyless life that needs
no writing for meaning—"

Ha Jin writes.

25. Make this try one art. Of what "is historical, flowing, and flown." Of what "is past, or passing, or to come." Try. Even though you are not Bishop, not Yeats, not Keats. But *You*, with "time/to lose yourself/in the moment/that becomes you" (Gordon, "Friends in Winter").

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