2002

Opening lecture for 2002 Graduate workshop

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TWO OUT-OF-THE-BLUE EITHER/OR "AESTHETIC STATEMENT" ASSIGNMENTS

For 511.1, Sp. 2002

I
(for those taking Greg Glazner's Special Topics)

Take his question, "Does poetry have any special claim on 'truth'?" and write a page or two:

First by defining your own understanding of the terms,

Second by answering the question *in general*;

Third by applying your answer to one or two of your own poems, *using specific examples*.

II

(For those taking Joanna Klink's Special Topics)

Take the question, "What does the tone and voice of a poem have to do with the poet's intentions in writing it" and write a page or two:

First by defining your own understanding of the terms,

Second by answering the question *in general*;

Third by applying your answer to one or two of your own poems, *using specific examples*.

III

(For those not having had the opportunity of taking either of these Special Topics Classes)

Do a little research (ask your workshop pals), pick whichever question appeals to you most, and follow the listed procedure.
I thought I'd begin way & usually do -
1st auto — then a little about what
interests me most in poetry - lot of talk - but rest of semester you get to do
most of it-

A) Nth - papa
Middlebury - First + Breadloaf - on way to NY - on way out to Stanford
man - ast + math - M A at UC
Met L at MacDowell - he at Columbia, me at Hender -
then Mexico - 12 years
Sarah Lawrence, then here
12 books - travel - mostly recently in Woodstock - East

B) So: what interests me about poetry

1) words, playing around w/ - constantly surprise me - way parts
reach way & lead to dawn of language - way they contain images; hence
they appeal to the body & mind, which is so important

2) "we love way they sound in mouth, the melody
of the poem," "the dark mouth of the vowels through which the image
tells its secret runes"

3) + the way images + the form of a poem make me able
to say so many things at once - layers + layers of it - really
like the inexpressible density of the moment - thinking + feeling -
each one of us, right now, full of so much - Pound def -

each one of us, right now, full of so much - Pound def -

4) also love music + love the music of poetry - not just the
way words feel in the mouth, the musical ways they resonate in each
other as well as the intellectual + structural -
but the rhythms of poetry - the way the rhythms catch
the feeling of a poem - at both overall and at particular moments

overall maybe rushing, excited, powerful - then suddenly as the sense
of the poem requires, perhaps quiet, languorous. Or halting. Or
stuttering - and then violent -

all sorts of things that can do with prose -
with meter, etc. with refrain + repetition, & in free verse esp
with line breaks, enjambments, end stops, internal caesurae as well as
internal rhyme - all that stuff
C) Also because of what poetry means in terms of being able to make intimate contact to others.

1. you feel, like everyone else, I'm trapped in my own body, own perceptions of world, own projections of what it's like, what other people are like, and hence how I can learn to understand them and live with them.

2. so poems can't undo that isolation completely, but at least they can make me feel as if I understand you, and for that I can make you understand me.

3. that's because of imagery, of course, the way in its reliance on body + mind, feeling + intellect, matter + spirit are, along with all the other things about poetry, make me feel that I understand, even if I'm not quite sure.

Because we all have some bodies, made up of some senses, and when we use them in imagery, we successfully, it can really be just as Burnshaw says, as a poem begins in the body and ends in the body.

And that's a wonderful thing, because it so powerfully reminds us that we're not really completely alone, we're part of a reality, that poetry, the possibility of experiencing which can we can actually experience in poetry. Czeslaw Milosz, the great Polish Nobel Prize winner from Berkeley, says it most beautifully when he says

"The purpose of poetry is to remind us how difficult it is to remain just one person, for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors, and invisible guests come in and out at will."

It's the feelings that do it, those physical feelings which, when combined with the intellect, in other words, putting into words, are poetry — and you remember ED's famous definition of poetry — "If the hairs on back of my head stand up, then I know it's poetry."

And she doesn't just mean love grunts. Or fear shrieks, or any other kind of "male feeling," but feelings to put into words, feelings understood combined to the things which just like our physical sensations, are always churning around in those instants of time we all live in, each a huge boiling complex of emotion sensations + half formed ideas.
Well, the Milosz + some of the other quotes are all things which tend to show up every time I start talking about poetry. And here's another thing, something I'd like to read at the beginning of every workshop—

Berryman + Passion

Dear [Name]

[Date: 02 Dec 2001 12:18:04 -0000]

Subject: [Content]

[Body of the email]

Best, [Your Name]
B) So that's one thing that interests me about poetry - Passion

C) Another thing that's important in poetry we might call Poetry + Accident

Life isn't a narrative, you know. Life isn't a story with a story's need of a trajectory from beginning. Sometimes it is, of course - our wishes (Edward Swift Oliver Twist) - but really we know that never, ever after. Even if we just don't know what's coming next, we never know. Even if we knew all lives end in death, we don't know what comes next; for all the stories we know, we never do.

The one thing that tells us about what happens after death, we don't know.

So, Accident is what we don't know.

Listen to some of the definitions - except in sense of 'accidental'

But what they leave out is luck, coincidence, chance, synchronicity, we call it, or even the kind of phenomenon a lot of that happen in poetry, as happened in me, re Crash.

So that's a 'bad' coincidence. But accidents like that aren't always bad. That's all wonderful. Lucky but always strange and mysterious synchronicities, resonances we might call them, that crop up when we're writing poetry at white heat of passion, all stop and not afraid to let anything - even the craziest thing imaginable - come into the poem that wants to -

1. That's what a lot of these exercises you've been doing - you know, word lists, interrupting a poem with a totally unrelated question, starting a poem in a strange city and following certain rules - what trying to do is to loosen us up - set us free to play in the winds of change just as we do in life. It's also behind a great deal of today's experimental poetry too. The language poets, all the people playing around with grammar and words - not to mention the surrealists - that's related to the pure strangeness, the unpredictability of life.

I also
They're after making us feel it's able to be in our poetry. And if we want to look down on them a bit by calling them a little artificial, we really shouldn't, because the very same reliance on accident, coincidence, and resonance is right at the heart of all poetry, even what's been called organic. Likely to be called the organic nature of poetry, the way every formal poetry seems to grow naturally, by a set of its own internally generated laws.

So you have Frost describing a poem like "a piece of ice on a stove, riding on its own melting," or Darrell describing a poem as a snowball rolling downhill. Or Frost again, poem begins in delight and ends in surprise: almost like "passion" accidental.

(3) actually it doesn't really matter which way you go in writing—either at the game-playing "artificial" or the more "organic" and so on the spectrum. Only thing is to listen to yourself, say whatever you want to say, whatever you do don't censor yourself, at least not—certainly not in your first 5—15 drafts. To let the poem tell you things. Listen to what you've said, and then respond to it, among back.

b) and that is especially important when you're stuck, say—because words themselves are so magical and strange, so packed to have different meanings which you find yourself to you play around trying to see what will fit right. For instance, what one thing to do is just to stop at one word and press on it, see if its right, or if that isn't right, some other word you can think of. If you let yourself go—to take its place

20 Surprise, coincidental connection you'd better want but didn't know you wanted until it happened.

Just as Twain says "The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter. It's the difference between the lightning bug and lightning." — The Lightning and they built long for—T. S. Eliot story.

Bringin' Hole + Thomas
c) Nowadays, the "buzz" does seem to be all on the more experimental ways of pursuing accident in, but even though I have both kinds of poetry, I'm very interested in what's been happening in the new avant-garde, as I've always been interested in the old avant-garde. Gertrude Stein, for instance, wrote an account of which I've brought you some excerpts copied out from a marvelous article I discovered in the latest edition of American Letters and Commentary by the poet Joan Retallack.

What interests me most, of course, is the case she makes for how very organic - i.e. natural - the very syntactically narratively discontinuous Stein and other such poetries really are. And she does it by means of chaos theory, a "new science" it came out when, how many know about?

"How Long is the Coast of France?" Benoît Mandelbrot

Chaos book

Anyway, IV. What I do want to assign to you for the next time is the 1st little group of poems from our text, Robert Hass' Best American Poetry 2001.

Very much, to have this book because, as you'll see from his introduction - which also please read very carefully - it is deliberately and generously full of a huge variety of kinds of poetry the contemporary scene is so full of. Next time I'll bring a pretty exhaustive critique of the book as a whole, so and I think we're awfully
Lucky to have that too—because what I urgently want is for us not to confine ourselves—esp not now, when you're just at the beginnings of your careers—to any one style of poetry at all. And you'll be astonished by this book's breadth of focus. There's something for everyone. I promise you—wait till you see it, dude!

I. Okay.

In a minute will get to the nuts & bolts of how we'll handle all these things—for now just want to say a few words about workshop in general:

A) Not a scholar—so will be talking about what I love is poetry

1) so will be focussing mostly on the particular
    poems from particular Auden story

2) but poem moves from partic to general
    So, obviously will be talking about its relations to the world with its literary and human surround

3) but mostly on poem itself
    a) its intentions on reader—what does it want from how react, b) what feelings
    c) how does it fulfills its intentions—what techniques strategies does it use to manipulate reader, make its reader experience the poem the way poem wants it to
    d) how well it fulfills its intentions—no intention can be a kind of intention

[trajectory, predication, dynamics of forces + stresses how it keeps reader interested, rhythms, tones, voice, pace, line, linebreaks]

1) also process of writing—Lu Ji—pron Kamenyakaa
2) and much time on revision—re-seeing, re-writing

mostly in one on one
B) As to time we spend together-
  1) want it of all for us to be generous to each other -
     here to help - put self in others shoes - remember our workshop story -
     not always broken down - everyone's secret wish if have to be critical, remember how you'd feel,
     phrase it as gently as possible - particularly but gently

(2) Also hope we'll enjoy this class -

Matthews: poetry too serious a matter not to be

taken lightly

besides poetry's no more than it's a game - and

it's a game, it's not "life"; it's essentially artificial - no matter that its intentions are to produce real feelings, real understandings

its a holy game, to be sure, but never its one that's based,

no matter whether its expressing deep sorrow or rage or love, or the

artifices poets must use to produce these feelings in the reader.

VI) Okay - now finally to the nuts & bolts - and then maybe we'll get to one of your poems - at any rate we have them for next time.

A) Get our syllabi, and ask questions! Lousy at details (or

1) that is); also at directions

  B) First, most important of all, what do you think of workshop

  meeting at my house? Do provide cider, you provide cookies -

  whatever snacks you want. Know some don't like - so be honest -

  also think - or maybe - a cat problem - if anyone has allergies, simply

  can't have it at home - or at my house anyway.

C) Okay, 1st of all, the readings from Hass

  this week have the introduction + 1st 5 poems -

  Read & read their explanations + bio notes (by)

  think which is your favorite and why:

  what are intentions - what may the author mean or

  less than author says - order, simply,

  how well fills

  also wider contexts lit & human
Mostly in class hope we'll have fun - relax, enjoy ourselves
(a) Matthew quote (Carl Van Vechten) "Poetry too serious a matter not to be taken lightly"
(b) be generous, thoughtful - remember each person's vulnerability - what's their secret wish of everyone
(c) focus on - all three things I just mentioned - each poem's intentions, how it accomplishes, how well - but do it constructively - don't just cut with an axe - be as gentle as you'd be to self, or someone you love almost as much as self

II Okay, now take out your syllabi please - me & directions
1) 1st of all toss
   a) see on reading sheet - each week ask you to read about 5 poems in assigned group (read plus connectives), think which receives how well for - ask the 3 ?'s intentions, how accomplish, how well (can be mistaken, you know) - also think ahead, besides, dictionary, form, mood, voice, rhyming, rhythm, abs trajectory
   predominant
   dynamics - forces + stresses
   how keeps reader interested
   same things you'll be thinking about for each other's poem - plus a wider context, ramifications, etc.
   b) meanwhile will have apt. one of you to be the talker/presenter for his/her favorite & to help lead a brief workshop discussion of it. Can write it out if want to, & hand it in - or not - doesn't really matter
   1st person Broadus, Calphorabelical
apt sheets - hours not the same from week to week - the earlier the more the merrier

apt me to be in person for one in he picks brief class discussion of it. but just at the beginning of each workshop need write out or not

As for poems - take home, write on each one - and don’t erase class only add to in class - because workshop talk is wonderful the way it adds in everyone’s including me - perception of the poem at hand - will be asking to see your comments from time to time - just to see how things going check my door (by Tuesday afternoon or am) to see order if miss a class (note: only one unexplained - try hard for none) be sure to pick up poems from box in LA 133 - do not leave new poems there.

3. revisions - can bring in for workshop (but identity team as revisions, and of which poem) - note that see are in addition to 8 poems or just to me, for one

4. one line of a map - at least 2 - if want to give me new poems + revisions (i.e. not due handed in to workshop) be sure to give them to me a couple of days in advance of appointment - will have appointment sheets available at each class - keep track of & please call me if can’t make one

5. may give exercises - how feel about - don’t let interfere w/ workshop

6. may assign written commentary on various poetry readings as they come up

7. and will be asking for memorizations

8. most of all, bring anything to class you want to bring from you’re reading: movie, concert, poetry gossip or news, view theories + criticisms that come up in other classes - and if something’s bothering about class be sure to tell me - I may have white hair, but not everyone - each time - start curve to workshop & still feel as excited as a 16 year old, and as eager to hear from all of you - what’s new in the world. Finally - Union Club?