

people around him, whom he already knows, but to the "stranger," to the future reader, to you and me, to each of us who would pause with him in the open air. Let there be an easy flow—an affectionate commerce—between us.

Here is one last "Inscription," the very next poem in *Leaves of Grass*. It's called "Thou Reader" and was written twenty-one years after "To You."

Thou reader throbbest life and pride and love the same as I,
Therefore for thee the following chants.

I am completely taken by the way that Whitman always addresses the reader as an equal, as one who has the same strange throb of life he has, the same pulsing emotions. There's a desperate American friendliness to the way he repeatedly dedicates his poems to strangers, to readers and poets to come, to outsiders everywhere. Whoever you are, he would embrace you. I love the deep affection and even need with which Whitman dedicates and sends forth his poems to the individual reader. He leaves each of us a gift. *To you*, he says, *the following chants*.

In the Beginning Is the Relation

The message in the bottle is a lyric poem and thus a special kind of communiqué. It speaks out of a solitude to a solitude; it begins and ends in silence. We are not in truth conversing by the side of the road. Rather, something has been written; something is being read. Language has become strange in this urgent and oddly self-conscious way of speaking across time. The poem has been (silently) en route—sometimes for centuries—and now it has signaled me precisely because I am willing to call upon and listen to it. Reading poetry is an act of reciprocity, and one of the great tasks of the lyric is to bring us into right relationship to each other. The relationship between writer and reader is by definition removed and mediated through a text, a body of words. It is a particular kind of exchange between two people not physically present to each other. The lyric poem is a highly concentrated and passionate form of communication between strangers—an immediate, intense, and unsettling form of literary discourse. Reading poetry is a way of connecting—

through the medium of language—more deeply with yourself even as you connect more deeply with another. The poem delivers on our spiritual lives precisely because it simultaneously gives us the gift of intimacy and interiority, privacy and participation.

Poetry is a voicing, a calling forth, and the lyric poem exists somewhere in the region—the register—between speech and song. The words are waiting to be vocalized. The greatest poets have always recognized the oral dimensions of their medium. For most of human history poetry has been an oral art. It retains vestiges of that orality always. Writing is not speech. It is graphic inscription, it is visual emblem, it is a chain of signs on the page. Nonetheless: "I made it out of a mouthful of air," W. B. Yeats boasted in an early poem. As, indeed, he did. As every poet does. So, too, does the reader make, or remake, the poem out of a mouthful of air, out of breath. When I recite a poem I reinhabit it, I bring the words off the page into my own mouth, my own body. I become its speaker and let its verbal music move through me as if the poem is a score and I am its instrumentalist, its performer. I let its heartbeat pulse through me as embodied experience, as experience embedded in the sensuality of sounds. The poem implies mutual participation in language, and for me, that participation mystique is at the heart of the lyric exchange.

Many poets have embraced the New Testament idea that "In the beginning was the Word," but I prefer Martin Buber's notion in *I and Thou* that "In the beginning is the relation." The relation precedes the Word because it is authored by the human. The lyric poem may seek the divine but it does so through the medium of a certain kind of human interaction. The secular can be made sacred through the body of the poem. I understand the relationship between the poet, the poem, and the reader not as a static entity but as a dynamic unfolding. An emerging sacramental event. A relation between an I and a You. A relational process.

Stored Magic

What kind of exchange are we dealing with? The lyric poem seeks to mesmerize time. It crosses frontiers and outwits the temporal. It seeks to defy death, coming to disturb and console you. ("These Songs are not meant to be understood, you understand," John Berryman wrote in one of his last Dream Songs: "They are only meant to terrify & comfort.")

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The poet is incited to create a work that can outdistance time and surmount distance, that can bridge the gulf—the chasm—between people otherwise unknown to each other. It can survive changes of language and in language, changes in social norms and customs, the ravages of history. Here is Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*:

True poetic practice implies a mind so miraculously attuned and illuminated that it can form words, by a chain of more-than-coincidences, into a living entity—a poem that goes about on its own (for centuries after the author's death, perhaps) affecting readers with its stored magic.

I believe such stored magic can author in the reader an equivalent capacity for creative wonder, creative response to a living entity. (Graves means his statement literally.) The reader completes the poem, in the process bringing to it his or her own past experiences. You are reading poetry—I mean really reading it—when you feel encountered and changed by a poem, when you feel its seismic vibrations, the sounding of your depths. “There is no place that does not see you,” Rainer Maria Rilke writes at the earth-shattering conclusion of his poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo”: “You must change your life.”

The Immense Intimacy, the Intimate Immensity

The profound intimacy of lyric poetry makes it perilous because it gets so far under the skin, into the skin. “For poems are not, as people think, simply emotions (one has emotions early enough)—they are experiences,” Rilke wrote in a famous passage from *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. I am convinced the kind of experience—the kind of knowledge—one gets from poetry cannot be duplicated elsewhere. The spiritual life wants articulation—it wants embodiment in language. The physical life wants the spirit. I know this because I hear it in the words, because when I liberate the message in the bottle a physical—a spiritual—urgency pulses through the arranged text. It is as if the spirit grows in my hands. Or the words rise in the air. “Roots and wings,” the Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez writes, “But let the wings take root and the roots fly.”

There are people who defend themselves against being “carried away” by poetry, thus depriving themselves of an essential aspect of the experience. But there are others who welcome the transport poetry provides. They welcome it repeatedly. They desire it so much they start to crave it daily, nightly, nearly abject in their desire, seeking it out the way hungry people seek food. It is spiritual sustenance to them. Bread and wine. A way of transformative thinking. A method of transfiguration. There are those who honor the reality of roots and wings in words, but also want the wings to take root, to grow into the earth, and the roots to take flight, to ascend. They need such falling and rising, such metaphorical thinking. They are so taken by the ecstatic experience—the overwhelming intensity—of reading poems they have to respond in kind. And these people become poets.

Emily Dickinson is one of my models of a poet who responded completely to what she read. Here is her compelling test of poetry:

If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know. Is there any other way.

Dickinson recognizes true poetry by the extremity—the actual physical intensity—of her response to it. It's striking that she doesn't say she knows poetry because of any intrinsic qualities of poetry itself. Rather, she recognizes it by contact; she knows it by what it does to her, and she trusts her own response. Of course, only the strongest poetry could effect such a response. Her aesthetic is clear: always she wants to be surprised, to be stunned, by what one of her poems calls “Bolts of Melody.”

Dickinson had a voracious appetite for reading poetry. She read it with tremendous hunger and thirst—poetry was sustenance to her. Much has been made of her reclusion, but, as her biographer Richard Sewall suggests, “She saw herself as a poet in the company of the Poets—and, functioning as she did mostly on her own, read them (among other reasons) for company.” He also points to Dickinson's various metaphors for the poets she read. She called them “the dearest ones of time, the strongest friends of the soul,” her “Kinsmen of the Shelf,” her “enthralled friends, the immortalities.” She spoke of the poet's “venerable

touched by the way Jarrell animates the woman's voice in this poem, how he inscribes his own voice into her voice and captures the reality of someone who is exceptional, commonplace, solitary.

Give a Common Word the Spell

The medium of poetry is language, our common property. It belongs to no one and to everyone. Poetry never entirely loses sight of how the language is being used, fulfilled, debased. We ought to speak more often of the *precision* of poetry, which restores the innocence of language, which makes the language visible again. Language is an impure medium. Speech is public property and words are the soiled products, not of nature, but of society, which circulates and uses them for a thousand different ends.

Poetry charts the changes in language, but it never merely reproduces or recapitulates what it finds. The lyric poem defamiliarizes words, it wrenches them from familiar or habitual contexts, it puts a spell on them. The lyric is cognate with those childish forms, the riddle and the nursery rhyme, with whatever form of verbal art turns language inside out and draws attention to its categories. As the eighteenth-century English poet Christopher Smart put it, freely translating from Horace's *Art of Poetry*:

It is exceedingly well
To give a common word the *spell*
To greet you as intirely new.

The poem refreshes language, it estranges and makes it new. ("But if the work be new, / So shou'd the song be too," Smart writes.) There is a nice pun on the word *spell* in Smart's Horatian passage since, as tribal peoples everywhere have believed, the act of putting words in a certain rhythmic order has magical potency. That power can only be released when the spell is chanted aloud. I'm reminded, too, that the Latin word *carmen*, which means "song" or "poem," has attracted English poets since Sidney because of its closeness to the word *charm*, and, in fact, in the older Latin texts it also means a magic formula, an incantation meant to make things happen, to cause action (Andrew Welsh, *Roots of Lyric*). And a charm is only effective when it is spoken or sung, incanted.

The lyric poem separates and uproots words from the daily flux and

flow of living speech but it also delivers them back—spelled, changed, charmed—to the domain of other people. As Octavio Paz puts it in *The Bow and the Lyre*:

Two opposing forces inhabit the poem: one of elevation or uprooting, which pulls the word from the language: the other of gravity, which makes it return. The poem is an original and unique creation, but it is also reading and recitation: participation. The poet creates it; the people, by recitation, re-create it. Poet and reader are two moments of a single reality.

Metaphor: A Poet is a Nightingale

The transaction between the poet and the reader, those two instances of one reality, depends upon figurative language—figures of speech, figures of thought. Poetry evokes a language that moves beyond the literal and, consequently, a mode of thinking that moves beyond the literal. "There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry," Robert Frost confesses in "The Constant Symbol," "but chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority." Poetry is made of metaphor. It is a collision, a collusion, a compression of two unlike things: A is B. The term *metaphor* comes from the Latin *metaphora*, which in turn derives from the Greek *metapherein*, meaning "to transfer," and, indeed, a metaphor transfers the connotations or elements of one thing (or idea) to another. It is a transfer of energies, a mode of interpenetration, a matter of identity and difference. Each of these propositions about the poem depends upon a metaphor: *The poem is a capsule where we wrap up our punishable secrets* (William Carlos Williams). *A poem is a well-wrought urn* (Cleantch Brooks), *a verbal icon* (W. K. Wimsatt). *A poem is a walk* (A. R. Ammons); *a poem is a meteor* (Wallace Stevens). *A poem might be called a pseudo-person. Like a person it is unique and addresses the reader personally* (W. H. Auden). A poem is a hand, a hook, a prayer. It is a soul in action.

When Paul Celan wrote, "A poem . . . can be a message in a bottle," he didn't think literally that he would be dropping his poems into the Seine (though he was writing them from Paris) and that someone might find them floating ashore on the banks of the Chicago River (though I

was living in Chicago when I first read him). What did he mean then? This book tries to tease out the implications.

The language of poetry, Shelley claims in his *Defence of Poetry*, "is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension." Shelley is suggesting that the poet creates relations between things unrecognized before, and that new metaphors create new thoughts and thus revitalize language. In his fine book *Poetic Diction*, Owen Barfield remarks that he would like to change one detail in Shelley's phrase, to alter "before unapprehended relations" to "forgotten relations." That's because poetry delivers back an archaic knowledge, an ancient and vitally metaphorical way of thinking, now mostly lost. The poet, by creating anew, is also likely to be "restoring something old."

The oldest English poetry, for example (the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* and poems written in other old Germanic languages), has a number of poetic tropes that enable the poet to describe things at an angle, without naming them, and thus invite the listener to imaginatively construct them. The most widespread are known as *kennings*; these occur in compounds, such as calling the sea *swanrad* ("swan-road") or *winegeard* ("home of the winds"). The word *ken*, meaning "to know," is still used in Scottish dialects, and indeed such figurative language is a way of knowing.

What especially concerns me here is how the reader actively participates in the making of meaning through metaphor, in thinking through the relation of unlike things. How do we apprehend these previously unapprehended or forgotten relations: in ironic tension, in exact correspondence, in fusion? The meaning emerges as part of a collaboration between writer and reader. Out of this interactive process comes the determination to what extent a metaphor *works*, where it breaks down, to what extent a poem can be a message in a bottle, or a machine made out of words (Williams), or a derangement of the senses (Rimbaud); to what extent "a book is a cubic piece of burning, smoking conscience—and nothing else" (Boris Pasternak); to what extent, as Shelley writes,

A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.

The singing of a nightingale becomes a metaphor for writing poetry here, and listening to that bird (that natural music) becomes a metaphor for reading it. One of the premises of Shelley's metaphor is that the poet "sings" in "solitude" without any consideration for an audience and that the audience—"his auditors"—responds to the work of an "unseen musician." They can't actually *see* him because they are physically removed from each other. And yet they are brought into mysterious (visionary) relation.

The philosopher Ted Cohen suggests that one of the main points of metaphor is "the achievement of intimacy." Cohen argues in "Metaphor and the Cultivation of Intimacy" that the maker and the appreciator of a metaphor are brought into deeper relationship with one other. That's because the speaker issues a concealed invitation through metaphor which the listener makes a special effort to accept and interpret. Such a "transaction constitutes the acknowledgment of a community." This notion perfectly describes how the poet enlists the reader's intellectual and emotive involvement and how the reader actively participates in making meaning in poetry. Through this dynamic and creative exchange the poem ultimately engages us in something deeper than intellect and emotion. And through this ongoing process the reader becomes more deeply initiated into the sacred mysteries of poetry.

Epic, Drama, Lyric: Be Plural Like the Universe!

There is a lively history of poetry, and poetry keeps engaging, fulfilling, and transgressing that history. Each of us becomes a more effective and responsive reader as we learn more about poetry's past and its forms. Literary works have conventionally been divided into three generic types or classes, dependent upon who is supposedly speaking:

- epic or narrative*: in which the narrator speaks in the first person, then lets the characters speak for themselves;
- drama*: in which the characters do all the talking;
- lyric*: uttered through the first person.

This useful but flawed textbook division evolved from Aristotle's fundamental distinction between three generic categories of poetic literature:

From the myriad thence-arous'd words,
 From the word stronger and more delicious than any,
 From such as now they start the scene revisiting,
 As a flock, twittering, rising, or overhead passing,
 Borne hither, ere all eludes me, hurriedly,
 A man, yet by these tears a little boy again,
 Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,
 I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter,
 Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
 A reminiscence sing.

The incantatory power of this is tremendous as the repetitions loosen the intellect for reverie. It seems to me that Whitman creates here the very rhythm of a singular reminiscence emerging out of the depths of mind, out of the sea waves and the rocking cradle, out of all the undifferentiated sensations of infancy, out of the myriad memories of childhood, out of all possible experiences the formative event of a boy leaving the safety of his bed and walking the seashore alone, moving "Out," "Over," "Down," "Up," "From," exchanging the safety of the indoors for the peril of the outdoors, facing his own vague yearnings and the misty void, mixing his own tears and the salt spray of the ocean, listening to the birds, understanding the language—the calling—of one bird. He walks the shore on the edge of the world, the edge of the unknown. He has entered the space that Emerson calls "*I and the Abyss*," the space of the American sublime.

In this region: out of all potential words, these words alone; out of all potential memories, this memory alone. It is the emerging rhythm itself that creates the Proustian sensation of being in two places at once, "A man, yet by these tears a little boy again, / Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves." Whitman creates through the rhetorical rhythm of these lines the very urgency of fundamental memory triggered and issuing forth. He splits himself off and moves seamlessly between the third person and the first person. And as the bird chanted to him ("From the memories of the bird that chanted to me") so he chants to us ("I, chanter of pains and joys"). This is a poem of poetic vocation.

It is telling that Whitman builds to the self-command, "A reminiscence sing." He memorializes the memory in song. There is an element

of lullaby in this poem, the lulling motion of the waves, the consoling sound of the sea. But this is a lullaby that wounds (as García Lorca said about Spanish lullabies), a lullaby of sadness that permeates the very universe itself, a lullaby that moves from chanting to singing. Paul Valéry calls the passage from prose to verse, from speech to song, from walking to dancing, "a moment that is at once action and dream." Whitman creates such a moment here. He would spin an enchantment beyond pain and joy, he would become the poetic shaman who authors that reminiscence *for us*, who magically summons up the experience *in us*.

The Wave Always Returns

Renewal is the "pivot of lyricism," as the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva says, comparing the lyrical element to the waves of the sea. "The wave always returns, and always returns as a different wave," she writes in her essay "Poets with History and Poets without History":

The same water—a different wave.

What matters is that it is a *wave*.

What matters is that the wave *will return*.

What matters is that it will *always* return *different*.

What matters most of all: however different the returning wave,
 it will always return as a wave of the *sea*.

What is a wave? Composition and muscle. The same goes for
 lyric poetry.

The poem is a muscular and composed thing. It moves like a wave and dissolves literalizations. We participate in its flow; we flow in its participation. We give ourselves up to its rhythm, to the process of individuation, the process of merging. When Tsvetaeva compares the lyrical element to the waves of the sea, I think of "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," I think of Wallace Stevens's seashore lyric "The Idea of Order at Key West," which leads to Elizabeth Bishop's "The End of March," Mark Strand's "The Idea," and Allen Grossman's "The Woman on the Bridge over the Chicago River." I think of Heraclitus's idea, expanded upon by Jung, that "It is delight . . . to souls to become wet." James Hillman explains in *The Dream and the Underworld* that "Water is the special

element of reverie, the element of reflective images and their ceaseless, ungraspable flow. Moistening in dreams refers to the soul's delight in death, its delight in sinking away from fixations in literalized concerns."

The poem moves from the eye to the ear, to the inner ear, the inner eye. It drenches us in the particulars of our senses, it moves us through the articulations of touch, taste, and scent. It actualizes our senses until we start to feel an animal alertness opening up within us. It guides our reflections. It actualizes an intuition flowing deeper than intellect. ("Beneath my incredulity / All at once is flowing / Joy... Intuition weightless and ongoing/ Like stanzas in a book / Or golden scales in the melodic brook."—James Merrill, *Scripts for the Pageant*.) We use our senses in poetry, but it is a mistake to try to use our senses everywhere. The poem plunges us from the visible to the invisible, it plunges us into the domain of psyche, of soul. It takes us into the realm of the demonic. Goethe notes:

In poetry, especially in that which is unconscious, before which reason and understanding fall short, and which, therefore, produces effects so far surpassing all conception, there is always something of the Demoniacal.

(Tuesday, March 8, 1831)

We discover in poetry that we are participating in something which cannot be explained or apprehended by reason or understanding alone. We participate in the imaginary. We create a space for fantasy, we enter our dream life, dream time. We deepen our breathing, our mindfulness to being, our spiritual alertness.

Poetry is an animating force. It comes alive when the poet magically inscribes a wave and thereby creates a new thing, when the text immobilizes it, when the individual poem becomes part of the great sea, when the bottle washes ashore and the wanderer happens upon it, when the reader experiences its inexhaustible depths...

Help Me, O Heavenly Muse

Robert Graves writes in *On English Poetry*, "Henceforward, in using the word *Poetry* I mean both the controlled and uncontrollable parts of the

art taken together, because each is helpless without the other." No one entirely understands the relationship in poetry between trance and craft, between conscious and unconscious elements, and, indeed, poets have been obsessed by the problem of what can and cannot be controlled in the making of art. This is especially instructive to readers who bring their own conscious purposes to poetry, their own unconscious mechanisms of displacement and identification, of sublimation, projection, condensation...

Sometimes the emphasis is put on conscious reason, on the conscious aspects of making. Paul Valéry spoke of "une ligne donné"—"the given line"—and suggested that everything else was labor, a matter of making. Baudelaire talked of "the labor by which a reverie becomes a work of art." In his 1846 essay "The Philosophy of Composition," Edgar Allan Poe emphasized the conscious method of trial and error:

Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought—at the true purposes seized only at the last moment—at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view—at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable—at the cautious selections and rejections—at the painful erasures and interpolations—in a word, at the wheels and pinions—the tackle for scene-shifting—the step-ladders and demon-traps—the cock's leathers, the red paint and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrion*.

Here Poe is giving enormous preference—and theatrical privilege—to the nature of reason in the creative process.

But there is something else. It may be true that the poet is given only a single line but that line is nonetheless a gift from the unconscious, a hunch, an intuition, and a perception. The poet is one who often thinks by feeling. Remember the famous Cartesian cogito ("I think, therefore I am") and Paul Valéry's useful variation on Descartes, "Sometimes I think; and sometimes I *am*" (*Analects*). Inspiration is in-breathing, indwelling,