

Skittish Libations

Quotations about Art, Writing, and the Creative Process

libation (lie b_y shun), *n.* 1. a pouring out of wine or other liquid in honor of a deity. 2. the liquid poured out. 3. *Often Facetious.* a. an intoxicating beverage, as wine. b. an act or instance of drinking such a beverage. [1350-1400; ME < L *libatio* = *liba(re)* to pour]

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling." (William Wordsworth)

"Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion, an escape from personality."
(T.S. Eliot)

"The whole age can be divided into those who write and those who do not write. Those who write represent despair, and those who read disapprove of it and believe that they have a superior wisdom--and yet, if they were able to write, they would write the same thing. Basically they are all equally despairing, but when one does not have the opportunity to become important with his despair, then it is hardly worth the trouble to despair and show it. Is this what it is to have conquered despair?"

(Kierkegaard, *Journals*)

". . . I speak
because I am shattered."

Louise Gluck, "The Red Poppy"

"We turn to stories and pictures and music because they show us who and what and why we are, and what our relationship is to life and death, what is essential and what, despite the arbitrariness of falling beams, will not burn."

(M. L'Engle)

"A novel does not assert anything, a novel searches and poses questions. I don't know whether my nation will perish and I don't know which of my characters is right. I invent stories, confront one with another, and by this means I ask questions. The stupidity of people comes from having an answer for everything. The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question. There is wisdom and tolerance in that attitude. . .all over the world people nowadays prefer to judge rather than to understand, to answer rather than ask, so that the voice of the novel can hardly be heard over the noisy foolishness of human certainties."

(Milan Kundera)

"Talking about music is like dancing about architecture." (Steve Martin)

"You'd be amazed at how expensive it is to make a wig look this cheap." (Dolly Parton)

"Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing." (Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author")

"The conventional does not amuse or sustain me. I must have thrill. I need it for my work. I have a scientific perspective and recognize in a way most artists don't that we are living in post-historical times. It's a historical singularity. We are the event horizon. The ordinary laws, expectations, rewards, admonishments, taboos, borders, all the fundamental assumptions are irrelevant. As a character says in my [San Francisco Noir](#) story, 'The Neutral Zone' – my most recent and most truly, shockingly autobiographical story, it shocks me – 'Human perimeters are collective background razor wire. We're too hip for that shit. It's residual static from a Baptist radio broadcast in Mississippi. Irrelevant and obsolete.'"

--Kate Braverman, [Bookslut](#)

"Facing the day is something a person does *every* day..."

Despite the flaws and imbalances, there is always something in a minor artist you just can't ignore, some tensile fiber of strength. Yes, yes, I confess, I identify with minor voices, they may be small or weak or repetitive, yet they produce undeniable moments of caged luminosity that strike right into my heart. My moments of transition have to do with caged luminosity, or perhaps, uncaging luminosity so that I can carry something of my creative moments into my day of coping with Others. Sometimes Others can really get me down."

(Molly Peacock, *Boulevard*, Nos. 53 & 54, Spring 2003)

"Writing produces anxiety. Looking inside myself and my experience, looking at my conflicts, engenders anxiety in me. Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer--a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo where I kick my heels, brood, percolate, hibernate and wait for something to happen." (Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Fronter*)

"A process blows the moon into the sun, pulls down the shabby curtains of the skin; and the heart gives up its dead." (Dylan Thomas)

". . . the most essential gift for a good writer is a built-in, shock-proof shit detector. This is the writer's radar and all great writers have had it." (Ernest Hemingway)

"I'm the subject," he stated, when explaining how he related to his creativity: "I'm also the verb as I paint, but I'm also the object. I am the complete sentence."

Richard Shiff on the painter Barnett Newman, *Common Language*, Fall 2003.

"At the risk of appearing foolish, a writer sometimes needs to be able to just stand and gape at this or that thing—a sunset or an old shoe—in absolute and simple amazement."

(Ray Carver, "On Writing.")

There was a man who found two leaves and came indoors holding them out saying to his parents that he was a tree.

To which they said then go into the yard and do not grow in the living-room as your roots may ruin the carpet.

He said I was fooling I am not a tree and he dropped his leaves.

But his parents said look it is fall.

(Russell Edson, "The Fall")

"A poet is a penguin—his wings are to swim with."

—E. E. Cummings (*I: Six Non-Lectures*.)

"Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing." (Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author")

Modern poetry "has been pretty much this: a series of attempts to come to terms with a world growing stranger by the day and year, and to make poetry relevant in that world – to master the meaning of it, and to rescue a language rendered empty and abstract, brutalized by hucksters and political men." (John Haines, qtd. by Valerie Trueblood, APR, Jan./Feb. 2003)

"...that words are no good; that words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at" (Addie Bundren in Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*)

"Neither a lofty degree of intelligence nor imagination nor both together go to the making of genius. Love, love, love, that is the soul of genius." (Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart)

"Give me the best instruments in Europe, but listeners who understand nothing and do not wish to understand and who do not feel with me in what I am playing, and all my pleasure is spoilt." (Mozart)

Let this be the poetry we seek, abraded as with acid by the hand's commitments, steeped in sweat and smoke, reeking of urine and lilies splattered by the motley trades within and without the law.

Poetry impure like a coat, a body, stained with food and shameful notions, with wrinkles, remarks, dreams, vigilance, prophecies, declarations of love and hate, beasts, quakes, idylls, political creeds, denials, doubts, assertions, taxes.

The sacred law of the madrigal and the decrees of touch, smell, taste, sight, hearing, the lust for justice, sexual desire, the sound of the ocean, nothing deliberately excluded, nothing deliberately accepted, entrance into the depth of things in a headlong act of love...

Whoever flees from bad taste will fall on the ice.

Pablo Neruda, trans. John Felstiner, APR July/Aug. 2001, p. 4

"...poetry is a vocal, which is to say, a bodily, art. The medium of poetry is a human body: the column of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds in the larynx and the mouth. In this

sense, poetry is just as physical or bodily an art as dancing." (Robert Pinsky, *The Sounds of Poetry* 8)

"Poems in a way are spells against death." (Richard Eberhart, qtd. by Associated Press, *Yahoo News*, 2005.

"Make it new." (Ezra Pound)

"The straight genres have been exhausted, and we need a radical yet revisionary spirit to _make it live_ (rather than _new_)." (Mark Rudman)

"A horizon of invisibility cuts across the geography of modern culture. Those who have passed through it cannot put their experience into familiar words and images because the languages they have inherited are inadequate to the new worlds they inhabit. They therefore express themselves in metaphors, paradoxes, contradictions, and abstractions rather than languages that 'mean' in the traditional way--in assertions that are apparently incoherent or collages using fragments of the old to create enigmatic symbols of the new."

(O. B. Hardison, Jr., *Disappearing Through The SkyLight: Culture and Technology in the Twentieth Century*)

"Art is thinking in images." – Aleksander Potebnya

"Thou madest Life in man and brute;
Thou madest Death; and lo, thy foot
Is on the skull which thou hast made."

(Tennyson, "In Memorium")

"Looking from outside into an open window one never sees as much as when one looks through a closed window. There is nothing more profound, more mysterious, more pregnant, more insidious, more dazzling than a window lighted by a single candle." (Baudelaire, "Windows," from *Paris Spleen*)

"We should write our poems as if in a letter to an intimate friend." (W.B. Yeats)

"You ought to wait and gather sense and sweetness for a whole lifetime, and a long one if possible, and then, at the very end, you might be able to write ten good lines." (Rainer Maria Rilke)

"In Dante's time, books were sold in apothecary shops: literature as medicine. I learned this when I was very ill, during an acute episode of manic depression, and I was struck by the profound metaphor behind this commercial fact. The apothecary of literature can heal, and I would need it desperately.

I had experienced a psyche-fracture, which included hallucinations of wings, seeing my own and others', these wings a metaphor for thought, the wings of the mind. Although I felt compelled to enact the urges of mania, I had a greater wish to hold very still and see what would happen if I let this madness take a metaphoric route. What happened? Poetry.

I don't normally write poetry, but in this illness I could write nothing except poetry. I never normally write at night, but I could write only in darkness.

The ancient Greeks thought the gods inspired poets through madness, and in *Ion*, Plato has Socrates say: 'For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses.' This *furor poeticus* was honoured in the Renaissance as the 'fine madness' that 'should possess a poet's brain', in the words of the Elizabethan poet Michael Drayton.

For me, poetry is medicine. The poet Les Murray writes: 'I'd disapproved of using poetry as personal therapy, but the Black Dog taught me better. Get sick enough, and you'll use any remedy you've got.' In the 19th century, people in asylums were encouraged to write poetry, while William Cowper (1731-1800) wrote that, in his depressions, 'I find writing, especially poetry, my best remedy.' Orpheus was both healer and poet and his lyre could vanquish melancholy." — Jay Griffiths

". . . I do not believe that poetry is simply an ability. . . Ancient medicine--and ancient philosophy, too, beginning with Plato--attributed the poetic faculty to a psychic disorder. A mania, in other words, a sacred fury, an enthusiasm, a transport. But mania is only one of the poles of the disorder; the other is absentia, inner emptiness, that 'melancholy apathy' that the poet speaks of. Fullness and emptiness, flight and fall, enthusiasm and melancholy: poetry."

(Octavio Paz)

"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." (Shelley)

"Poets are the legislators of the unacknowledged world." (Oppen)

"The dream of art is not to assert what is already known, but to illuminate the hidden, and the path to the hidden world is not inscribed by the will." (Louise Gluck, qtd. by Elizabeth Dodd, *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet*)

"Art is a hammer to beat the world, not a mirror to reflect it." (Vladimir Majakovskij)

"You know what I've decided? I don't want to be cremated. I used to, but now I think it sounds just a little too much like a blender speed. Now I've decided I want to be embalmed, and then I want a plastic surgeon to come put in silicone implants everywhere. Then I want to be laid out in the woods like Snow White, with a gravestone that reads *Gotta Dance*." The whiskey was going down sweet. That was what happened after a while, with no meal to assist--it had to do the food work on its own. "There. We talked about death."

Lorrie Moore, "Starving Again"

". . .with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes, or rather obliterates, every other consideration." (Keats)

"A poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language." (Auden)

"Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language." (Aldo Leopold)

"I find it useless and boring to represent what exists, since nothing that exists can satisfy me. Nature is ugly, and I prefer the monsters of my fancy to trite reality. . . It is both by poetry and through poetry. . . that the soul dimly descries the splendors beyond the tomb; and when an exquisite poem brings tears to our eyes, those tears are not the proof of overabundant joy: they bear witness rather to an impatient melancholy, a clamant demand by our nerves, our nature, exiled in imperfection, which would fain enter into immediate possession, while still one earth, of a revealed paradise. . . Thus the poetic principle is strictly and simply the human longing for a superior form of beauty. . ." (Baudelaire)

"Art is something that makes your soul rest." (Zebo Chagrenny, from "Art-chives" online)

"Art is a train of thought wreck." (Brent Stone, from "Art-chives" online)

" Art is a very small, off-duty Austrian traffic cop. Or a banana." (SO, from "Art-chives" online)

"[Art is] three little letters that just can't hold it in any longer." (simone, from "Art-chives" online)

"If you put a frame around it, you can call anything art." (Bill Pierce, from "Art-chives" online)

"arT is that uncomfortable warm of sitting in a seat just abandoned." (dawn, from "Art-chives" online)

"Have you ever seen Demmi Moore tits? This is the true meaning of art!" (Tiago Vaz, from "Art-chives" online)

"One spits on the sublime.
One lies in bed alone, reading
Yesterday's newspaper. One
Has composed a beginning, say,
A phrase or two. No more!
There has been traffic enough
In the boudoir of the muse.

And still they come, demanding entrance,
Noisy, and with ecstatic cries
Catching the perfume, forcing their way--
For them, what music? Only,
Distantly, through some door ajar,
Echoes, broken strains, and the garland
Crushed at the threshold."

(Donald Justice, "Sonatina in Green")

"The new formalists put free verse poets in the ironic and unprepared position of being the status quo. Free verse, the creation of an older literary revolution, is now the long-established, ruling orthodoxy; formal poetry the unexpected challenge."

(Dana Gioia)

The new formalists and the language poets "share common strategies for withholding and specializing poetry. . .And if this is true, then [their] project. . .seems to be far less radical than it is nostalgic. It involves. . .not the recovery of traditional forms or the creation of new ones, but merely the classification or reclassification of poetry according to standard categories. . .[O]ne possible implication of this situation is that all the strife and bickering of the current literary wars masks a basic disinclination to alter American poetry. Beneath the rhetoric of innovation lies an investment in the status quo. In this reading the project of the language poets and new formalists is not to renovate the ghetto of free verse but to free it for the subdivisions of technique."

(Lynn Emanuel, "Language Poets, New Formalists and the Techniquization of Poetry")

"We must realize, I think, that the writer in freer forms must have an even greater fidelity to his subject matter than the poet who has the support of form. He must keep his eye on the subject, and his rhythm must move as the wind moves, must be imaginatively right, or he is lost."

(Theodore Roethke)

"Though logic-choppers rule the town,
And every man and maid and boy
Has marked a distant object down,
An aimless joy is a pure joy,"
Or so did Tom O'Roughley say
That saw the surges running by,
"And wisdom is a butterfly
And not a gloomy bird of prey."

--from "Tom O'Roughley," William Butler Yeats

"Perfect understanding will sometimes almost extinguish pleasure." (A.E. Houseman)

"The day I remember with greatest clarity of my four years as a Yale undergraduate was the one on which Stephen Spender and then Robert Frost appeared and I saw that poetry wasn't just a literary genre but, literally, a blood sport."

David R. Slavitt, "Poetric Justice," *Boulevard*, Spring 2003.

"Human languages themselves are the greatest of all works of art beside which the works of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare are minor variations."

(Eric McLuhan, *Electric Language*)

"The joke says: Under capitalism, man exploits man, but under communism, it's the other way around." (Kellie Cherrie, *The Exiled Heart*)

"The secret of poetry is cruelty." (Jon Anderson)

"The pleasures of heaven are with me, and the pains of hell are with me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself. . . the latter I translate into a new tongue."

(Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*)

"It has always been one of the most essential functions of art to engender a demand for which the hour of full satisfaction is yet to come."

Walter Benjamin, qtd. by Richard Shiff, *Common Language*, Fall 2003

"Earth took of earth earth with ill;
Earth other earth gave earth with a will.
Earth laid earth in the earth stock-still:
Then earth in earth had of earth its fill."

Anonymous, United Kingdom, circa 1000

"I paint pictures of myself to. . . I guess, yeah, to remind myself that I am still around." (Andy Warhol)

". . . a guide the English writer at the present day will nowhere find. Failing this, all that can be looked for, all indeed that can be desired is, that his attention should be fixed on excellent models; that he may reproduce, at any rate, something of their excellence, by penetrating himself with their works and by catching their spirit. . . ."

(Matthew Arnold)

"Poetry and Hums aren't things which you get, they're things which get you. And all you can do is go where they can find you. (Winnie-the-Pooh)

". . . though the study of books is necessary, it is not sufficient to constitute literary eminence. . . . No man ever yet became great by imitation. Whatever hopes for the veneration of mankind must have invention in the design or the execution; either the effect must itself be new, or by the means by which it is produced. Either truths hitherto unknown must be discovered, or those which are already known enforced by stronger evidence, facilitated by clearer method, or elucidated by brighter illustrations.

Fame cannot spread wide or endure long that is not rooted in nature, and manured by art. That which hopes to resist the blast of malignity, and stand firm against the attacks of time, must contain in itself some original principle of growth. The reputation which arises from the detail or transposition of borrowed sentiments, may spread for awhile, like ivy on the rind of antiquity, but will be torn away by accident or contempt, and suffered to rot unheeded on the ground."

(Samual Johnson, *The Rambler*)

"I admire Galway's poetry enormously. . . I love *The Book of Nightmares*, although I find a lot of people won't forgive its bad writing."

There is some bad writing in it.

"Big fucking deal. Do they realize that most books are mostly bad writing?"

(Philip Levine, interviewed by Stanley Plumly and Wayne Dodd.)

"While good poetry has to be well-written, no one quite knows what it means to write well. Everyone knows that writing well, even in lines, even in meters and rhymes, doesn't necessarily make poetry. It makes verse. Poetry is better than verse. . . I choose poetry. I choose the ugly as well as the beautiful, knowing it will all be beautiful soon enough. I choose the unknown (for now), the mystery rather than the accepted solution, the cracked bowl over the flawless one, the voice that has a little spit and phlegm in it, the used shoes, imagination over analysis, Williams over Stevens, the impure every time."

(Marvin Bell)

Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood. (T.S. Eliot)

"American poetry prides itself on its great scope and diversity, but one wonders if an outsider might not come away with a very different notion. Imagine what an intelligent eighteenth-century reader would conclude if he surveyed the several hundred books of poetry published in America this past year. . .His overall reaction, I suspect, would be a deep disappointment over the predictable sameness, the conspicuous lack of diversity in what he read. Where are the narrative poems, he would ask, the verse romances, ballads, hymns, verse dramas, didactic tracts, burlesques, satires, the songs actually meant to be sung, and even the pastoral eclogues? Are stories no long told in poetry? Important ideas no longer discussed at length? The panoply of available genres would seem reduced to a few hardy perennials which poets worked over and over again with dreary regularity--the short lyric, the ode, the familiar verse epistle, perhaps the epigram, and one new-fangled form called the 'sequence' which often seemed to be either just a group of short lyrics stuck together or an ode in the process of falling apart. . .These new poets, he might conclude, are a very monotonous bunch indeed. . ."

(Dana Gioia, "The Dilemma of the Long Poem")

"It is good fun to ruin the surface of a piece of paper; to, as it were, run amuck. One hurts no one, and paper is cheap enough." (Russel Edson)

"If the meters do represent or imitate anything in general, it may be nothing more (or less) than some psychological compulsion, a sort of counting on the fingers or stepping on cracks, magic to keep an unpredictable world under control."

(Donald Justice)

"When the poets repair to the forest of language it is with the express purpose of getting lost; far gone in bewilderment, they seek crossroads of meaning, unexpected echoes, strange encounters; they fear neither detours, surprises, nor darkness. But the huntsman who ventures into this forest in hot pursuit of the 'truth,' who sticks to a single continuous path, from which he cannot deviate for a moment on pain of losing the scent or imperiling the progress he has already made, runs the risk of capturing nothing but his shadow. Sometimes the shadow is enormous, but a shadow it remains."

(Valery, *Aesthetics*.)

"A hunter is someone who listens.
So hard to his prey it pulls the weapon.
Out of his hand and impales.
Itself."

(Anne Carson, "Town of the Sound of a Twig Breaking")

"It seemed very sad to see you going off in your new shoes alone." (Zelda Fitzgerald, in a letter F.Scott)

"Slam dancing was a deadend. Break dancing, coming a living ground, goes out through media but becomes ultimately transformed into another living ground –

the kids in the elementary school down the street in Santa Monica break dance. Which is to say, a grace has been added to their lives. A possibility of grace. With the vitality that comes from having originated from a living ground. The media here is taking its proper role as a channel, not as a world in itself. It's possible that these kids are being affected more in their bodies and their daily lives by the South Bronx subculture than by high-gloss films like *Gremlins* or *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. Even through all this static, life can speak to life."

(Michael Ventura)

"Poetry never takes language as a raw material ready to hand, rather it is poetry which first makes language possible. Poetry is the primitive language of a historical people. Therefore, in just the reverse manner, the essence of language must be understood through the essence of poetry."

(Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being*)

"For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set."
(Alfonse Stompanato, a character in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*)

"The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing. . ."

(Roland Barthes, *Image--Music--Text*)

"We all know how many times a critic reads a book:
Less than once."

(Marvin Bell)

"By and by it will be found that all Literature has become one boundless self-devouring Review . . . thus does Literature also, like a sick thing, superabundantly 'listen to itself'."
(Thomas Carlyle, "Characteristics")

"It's the centipede syndrome, you know? The centipede was asked which foot he puts after which, and he couldn't walk anymore." (Roman Polanski, "What I've Learned," *Esquire*, Dec. 99)

I believe in you my soul. . . .the other I am must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.

Loaf with me on the grass. . . .loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want. . . .not custom or lecture, not even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice."

(Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*)

"I should be the head rodeo clown, but it's all just an old boy's club." (Jaimie on *Mad About You*)

"For me, all poems begin in some fragment of motivating language--the task of writing a poem is the search for context. Other imaginations begin, I believe, in the actual, in the world, in some concrete thing which examination endows with significance. That process is generative: its proliferating associations produce a broad, lush, inclusive and, at times, playful poetry; its failures seem simply diffuse, without focus. My own work begins at the opposite end, at the end, literally, at illumination, which has then to be traced back to some source in the world. This method, when it succeeds, makes a thing that seems irrefutable. Its failure is felt as portentousness."

(Louise Gluck)

"For men are willing to suffer almost anything from each other or from heaven itself, so long as true words do not touch them." (Leopardi)

"Tell all the Truth but tell it slant." (Emily Dickinson)

Serious science fiction is what takes us "in the direction of the great myths and legends, which is always toward an intensification of the mystery of the real." (Jack Williamson)

"Paint not the thing, but the effect it produces." (Mallarme)

"In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed."

(Narrator of Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story")

"You hear what we speak by the fleshly sense, and you do not want the syllables to stand where they are; rather you want them to fly away so that others may come and you may hear a whole sentence. So it is with all things that make up a whole by the succession of parts; such a whole would please us much more if all the parts could be perceived at once rather than in succession."

(Augustine, *Confessions*)

"Fragments are the only forms I trust." (Narrator of Donald Barthelme's "See the Moon?")

". . . I was thinking about the poet Christopher Smart,
Who wanted to kneel down and pray without ceasing
In every one of the splintered London streets,

And was locked away in the madhouse at St. Luke's
With his sad religious mania, and his wild gratitude,
And his grave prayers for the other lunatics. . ." (Edward Hirsch, "Wild Gratitude")

"Why is my brain always so alive when I'm too drunk ever to do anything about it?"

(Norman Mailer)

"No one would bother to write verse if the poet's goal were to make himself understood." (Montale)

"From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own, and much more, not ourselves. . ."

(Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*)

"O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
how can we know the dancer from the dance?" (W.B. Yeats)

"It takes a great deal of will power to write poetry, but part of that will power must be employed
in trying to relax the will. . .creation, whether of God, man, or nature, seems to be an activity
whose only intention is to abolish intention. . ."

(Northrop Frye)

"Rim ember us poke in cent tense all mow stall ways con deigns word snot in ten did" (Robert
Beard)

"Pretty high once, he told me in Budapest
everything becomes blue with the moon,
that it was not uncommon to see old blue horses
by his house when he was a boy.

Then he apologized,
said the narcotic made his mind odd,
odd like a poet's."

(James L.White, "Poems of Submission")

"Let us remember that the poet (whether he rhymes, sings, paints or sculpts) is not on a level
beneath which other men crawl; the mob is a level and the poet flies above it. . .Oh, poets, you
have always been proud; now be more than proud, be scornful!" (Mallarme)

"A poet in our times is a semi-barbarian in a civilized community. He lives in the days that are
past. His ideas, thoughts, feelings, associations, are all with barbarous manners, obsolete
customs, and exploded superstitions. The march of his intellect is like that of a crab, backwards. .
.The highest aspirations of poetry are resolved into three ingredients: the rant of unregulated
passion, the shining of exaggerated feeling, and the cant of factitious sentiment. . .It can never
make a philosopher, nor a statesman, nor in any class of life a useful or rational man."

(Thomas Love Peacock)

". . .to the poets therefore. . .we must issue orders requiring them to represent good character in their poems or not to write at all; we must issue similar orders to all artists and prevent them portraying bad character, ill-discipline, meanness, or ugliness in. . .any work of art, and if they are unable to comply they must be forbidden to practice their art." (Plato)

"The origin and source of poetry is the wisdom to write according to moral principles." (Horace)

"It has been assumed. . .that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. . . But the simple fact is, that. . .there neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified -- more supremely noble than. . .a poem written solely for the poem's sake. . .He must be theory-made beyond redemption who. . .still persists in attempting to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth." (Poe)

"A whole crowd of people imagine that the aim of poetry is some sort of lesson, that its duty is to fortify conscience, or to perfect social behavior, or even, finally, to demonstrate something or other that is useful. . .but poetry has no other aim but itself; it can have no other; and no poem will be as great, as noble, so truly worthy of the name 'poem' as the one written for no purpose other than the pleasure of writing a poem. . .[I]f the poet has pursued a moral aim, he will have diminished his poetic power; nor will it be incautious to bet that his work is bad." (Baudelaire)

"There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written or poorly written. That is all."

(Oscar Wilde)

"I should be the head rodeo clown, but it's all just an old boy's club." (Jaimie on *Mad About You*)

"What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet." (Keats)

"A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things they have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil."

(Narrator of Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story")

"In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed. When a booby trap explodes, you close your eyes and duck and float outside yourself. When a guy dies, like Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it seemed."

(Narrator of Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story")

"This must be what I wanted to be doing,
Walking at night between the two deserts,
Singing."

(W.S. Merwin, "Air")

"Now...it is a question of experimentation (which, if its aim is to promote gregarious insecurity, requires the security of the experimenter's mind -- namely, that he be sheltered and isolated, so that he can surrender himself, without witnesses, to the various phases of failure that his success requires)." (Pierre Klossowski / Nietzsche and the Vicious)

"Lyricism is the elaboration of an exclamation." (Valery)

"Lyricism is the elaboration of a protest." (Breton)

Before class on Monday the teacher, who smelled of Emeraude and faintly of onions and who felt herself perhaps the sort of woman doomed in middle age to be always taking other people's children for walks in parks, read a giant stack of student poems. The ones by a black student named Darrel Erni were the most interesting, mostly about women he's known in Vietnam. The teacher picked at the sweater lint caught in the ragged edge of her fingernail and then stirred her coffee with a knife.

In class she grew dramatic. "You need to ask yourself questions," she told her students in

something that resembled a hiss. "I want you to ask yourself, 'How is writing a public act? What does poetry owe the world? Are we all vagabonds at a cosmic dump or are we just not paying attention?'" Then she stomped around back and forth in front of the class and spoke of nuclear protest, presi- dential petitions, throwing pies with lots of whipped cream. "Do you know whether this college has investments in South Africa?"

Outside, the leaves that had not blushed or died were doing a dazzling fade, the gold, paper money of pirates.

"I want you to think about the sick luxury of your being," she said. And then she lit up a cigarette.

(Lorrie Moore, *Anagrams*)

The mind of the contemporary lyric poet does not view word and world as either-or categories; it's a mind which rests easily with, on the one hand, any creative writing workshop's love of close, even formalist reading and, on the other hand, a firm awareness that the boundaries of the literary text are really not closed; that all texts function in a discursive field from which there is no escape. It's a mind, in fact, which lives precisely in that always agitated, contested boundary between form and content, word and world, "constructed experience" and "lived experience" (Drucker 34). In any given act of artistic perception, language and world variously flow into each other, bump, smudge, change places, have stare-downs. They denigrate, deny, and seduce each other; obliterate and otherwise become each other. It's possible this is true of any perception or any writing, but in poetry, I would argue, it's much more to the fore, much more entangled in each work's very content.

And I would also say that this point of struggle, this uncertain boundary of such interest to poets, might also be regarded as "the body." The body is the ultimate interface, simultaneously open and closed. It contains, defines and limits us, yet at the same time brings us into contact with everything outside of us and not us. It is our greatest source of both isolation and ecstatic connection, and it is where poetry lives.

So I'll say it again. Some acts and artifacts are more self-referential than others. Engaging with words *as* words, grokking and being grokked by language, means immersion in some of the most complex, maddening, fabulous and heart-breaking questions we can possibly ask. It means a heightened perception of the possibilities of language even as we are feeling its limits, its displacing action, the inevitable, shifty space between *what points* and *what is pointed at*. Writing along the very nerve-line of language-making and language-feeling means to be alive in the moment to the ongoing drama of creating ourselves as symbol-making beings, with both the wonder and the despair such being entails. And this live instance of creation – the twists and turns of intuition, reasoning, desire, and memory – dramatically informs the final work. Creation doesn't occur and then get poured into a structure, but neither is it just a wild hurling onto the page. Form and content duke it out, screw, converse, diddle each other, ignore each other, become each other...

(Daryl Dreads skin)

"My worst fears have been realized. The damage is more extensive than previously imagined. I must act while there is still time. I must find someone. . ." (Computer game box)

Tell me.
Have you ever seen woods so.
Deep so.
Every tree a word does your heart stop?

(Anne Carson, "Town On the Way through God's Woods")

"I know it's only rock and roll, but I like it." (Mick Jagger)

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