

The Poet's Essay —

John Berryman

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One Answer to a Question:

Changes

THIS SLIGHT EXPLORATION OF SOME OF MY OPINIONS ABOUT my work as a poet, you may wish to bear in mind, is the statement of a man nearing fifty, and I am less impressed than I used to be by the universal notion of a continuity of individual personality—which will bring me in a moment to the first and most interesting of the four questions proposed by Howard Nemerov. It is a queer assignment. I've complied with similar requests before, but never without fundamental misgivings. For one thing, one forgets, one even deliberately forgets in order to get on with new work, and so may seriously misrepresent the artist—that-was twenty years ago. For another, there are trade secrets. At the same time that one works partly to open fresh avenues for other writers (though one would not dream of admitting it), one has secrets, like any craftsman, and I figure that anyone who deserves to know them deserves to find them out for himself. So I do not plan to give anything away.

The question was this: "Do you see your work as having essentially changed in character or style since you began?"

I would reply: *of course*. I began work in verse-making as a burning, trivial disciple of the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats, and I hope I have moved off from there. One is obsessed at different times by different things and by different ways of putting them. Naturally there are catches in the question. What does "essentially" mean? What is "character"? What is "style"? Still the question, if semantically murky, is practically clear, and I respond to it with some personal history.

When I said just now "work in verse-making," I was leaving out some months of protoapprenticeship during which I was so inexperienced that I didn't imitate *anybody*. Then came Yeats, whom I didn't so much wish to resemble as to *be*, and for several fumbling years I wrote in what it is convenient to call "period style," the Anglo-American style of the 1930's, with no voice of my own, learning

chiefly from middle and later Yeats and from the brilliant young Englishman W. H. Auden. Yeats somehow saved me from the then-crushing influences of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot—luckily, as I now feel—but he could not teach me to sound like myself (whatever that was) or tell me what to write about. The first poem, perhaps, where those dramatic-to-me things happened was (is) called “Winter Landscape.” It is mounted in five five-line stanzas, unrhymed, all one sentence. (I admit there is a colon near the middle of the third stanza.)

Winter Landscape

The three men coming down the winter hill
In brown, with tall poles and a pack of hounds
At heel, through the arrangement of the trees
Past the five figures at the burning straw,
Returning cold and silent to their town,

Returning to the drifted snow, the rink
Lively with children, to the older men,
The long companions they can never reach,
The blue light, men with ladders, by the church
The sledge and shadow in the twilit street,

Are not aware that in the sandy time
To come, the evil waste of history
Outstretched, they will be seen upon the brow
Of that same hill: when all their company
Will have been irrecoverably lost,

These men, this particular three in brown
Witnessed by birds will keep the scene and say
By their configuration with the trees,
The small bridge, the red houses and the fire,
What place, what time, what morning occasion

Sent them into the wood, a pack of hounds
At heel and the tall poles upon their shoulders,
Thence to return as now we see them and
Ankle-deep in snow down the winter hill
Descend, while three birds watch and the fourth flies.

This does not sound, I would say, like either Yeats or Auden—or Rilke or Lorca or Corbière or any of my other passions of those remote days. It derives its individuality, if I am right, from a peculiar

steadiness of sombre tone (of which I'll say more presently) and from its peculiar relation to its materials—drawn, of course, from Brueghel's famous painting. The poem is sometimes quoted and readers seem to take it for either a verbal *equivalent* to the picture or (like Auden's fine Brueghel poem, “Musée des Beaux Arts,” written later) an *interpretation* of it. Both views I would call wrong, though the first is that adopted in a comparative essay on picture and poem recently published by two aestheticians at the University of Notre Dame.* After a competent study, buttressed by the relevant scholarship, of Brueghel's painting, they proceed to the poem—where, there being no relevant scholarship, they seem less at ease—and so to the relation between the two. Some of the points made are real, I believe. To quote the two with which they begin: they say the poem's “elaborative sequence urged on by the sweeping carry-over lines”—they mean run-on—“within the stanza or between stanzas—preserves the same order of presentation and the same grouping of elements as the Brueghel composition . . . Purposively restricting himself to a diction as sober, direct, and matter-of-fact as the painter's treatment of scene and objects, Berryman so composes with it that he achieves an insistent and animated pattern of strong poetic effect.” And so on, to the end of the article, where the “disclosed affinities” of the two works are found testifying to the “secret friendship” of the arts. Nowhere is anything said as to what the poem is *about*, nor is any interest expressed in that little topic; the relation between the works is left obscure except for the investigation of affinities. An investigation of *differences* would have taken them further.

Very briefly, the poem's extreme sobriety would seem to represent a reaction, first, against Yeats's gorgeous and seductive rhetoric and, second, against the hysterical political atmosphere of the period. It dates from 1938–9 and was written in New York following two years' residence in England, during recurrent crises, with extended visits to France and Germany, especially one of the Nazi strongholds, Heidelberg. So far as I can make out, it is a war poem, of an unusual negative kind. The common title of the picture is *Hunters in the Snow* and of course the poet knows this. But he pretends not to, and calls their spears (twice) “poles,” the resultant governing emotion being a certain stubborn incredulity—as the hunters are loosed while the peaceful nations plunge again into war. This is not the subject of Brueghel's painting at all, and the interpretation of the *event of the poem* proves that the picture has merely provided necessary material

* If anyone is *truly* curious, this can be found in the University of Texas *Studies in Literature and Language*, v. 3 (Autumn 1963).

from a tranquil world for what is necessary to be said—but which the poet refuses to say—about a violent world.

You may wonder whether I dislike aestheticians. I do.

Very different from the discovery made in "Winter Landscape," if the foregoing account seems acceptable—namely, that a poem's force may be pivoted on a missing or misrepresented element in an agreed-on or imposed design—was a discovery made in another short piece several years later. (It also is twenty-five lines long, unrhymed, but, I think, much more fluid.)

The Ball Poem

What is the boy now, who has lost his ball,
 What, what is he to do? I saw it go
 Merrily bouncing, down the street, and then
 Merrily over—there it is in the water!
 No use to say "O there are other balls":
 An ultimate shaking grief fixes the boy
 As he stands rigid, trembling, staring down
 All his young days into the harbour where
 His ball went. I would not intrude on him,
 A dime, another ball, is worthless. Now
 He senses first responsibility
 In a world of possessions. People will take balls,
 Balls will be lost always, little boy,
 And no one buys a ball back. Money is external.
 He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes,
 The epistemology of loss, how to stand up
 Knowing what every man must one day know
 And most know many days, how to stand up.
 And gradually light returns to the street,
 A whistle blows, the ball is out of sight,
 Soon part of me will explore the deep and dark
 Floor of the harbour . . . I am everywhere,
 I suffer and move, my mind and my heart move
 With all that move me, under the water
 Or whistling, I am not a little boy.

The discovery here was that a commitment of identity can be "reserved," so to speak, with an ambiguous pronoun. The poet himself is both left out and put in; the boy does and does not become him and we are confronted with a process which is at once a process of

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life and a process of art. A pronoun may seem a small matter, but she matters, he matters, it matters, they matter. Without this invention (if it is one—Rimbaud's "*Je est un autre*" may have pointed my way, I have no idea now) I could not have written either of the two long poems that constitute the bulk of my work so far. If I were making a grandiose claim, I might pretend to know more about the administration of pronouns than any other living poet writing in English or American. You will have noticed that I have said nothing about my agonies and joys, my wives and children, my liking for my country, my dislike of Communist theory and practice, etc., but have been technical. Art is technical, too.

So far I have been speaking of short poems and youth, when enthusiasms and hostilities, of an artistic kind, I mean, play a bigger role in inspiration than perhaps they do later. I do not know, because I see neither enthusiasm nor hostility behind "The Ball Poem." But I was nearly thirty then. I do know that much later, when I finally woke up to the fact that I was involved in a long poem, one of my first thoughts was: Narrative! let's have narrative, and at least one dominant personality, and no fragmentation! In short, let us have something spectacularly nor *The Waste Land*, the best long poem of the age. So maybe hostility keeps on going.

What had happened was that I had made up the first stanza of a poem to be called *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and the first three lines of the second stanza, and there, for almost five years, I stuck. Here is the passage:

The Governor your husband lived so long
 moved you not, restless, waiting for him? Still,
 you were a patient woman—
 I seem to see you pause here still:
 Sylvester, Quarles, in moments odd you pored
 before a fire at, bright eyes on the Lord,
 all the children still.
 "Simon . . .": Simon will listen while you read a Song.

Outside the New World winters in grand dark
 white air lashing high thro' the virgin stands
 foxes down foxholes sigh . . .

The dramatic mode, hovering behind the two meditative lyrics I've quoted, has here surely come more into the open; and also here I had overcome at once two of the paralyzing obstacles that haunt the path

of the very few modern poets in English who have attempted ambitious sizable poems: what form to use and what to write about. The eight-line stanza I invented here after a lifetime's study, especially of Yeats's, and in particular the one he adopted from Abraham Cowley for his elegy "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory." Mine breaks not at midpoint but after the short third line; a strange four-beat line leads to the balancing heroic couplet of lines five and six, after which seven is again short (three feet, like line three) and then the stanza widens into an alexandrine rhyming all the way back to one. I wanted something at once flexible and grave, intense and quiet, able to deal with matter both high and low.

As for the subject: the question most put to me about the poem is why I chose to write about this boring high-minded Puritan woman who may have been our first American poet but is not a good one. I agree, naturally, and say that I did not choose her—somehow she chose me—one point of connection, at any rate, being the almost insuperable difficulty of writing high verse at all in a land that cared and cares so little for it. I was concerned with her though, almost from the beginning, as a woman, not much as a poetess. For four-and-a-half years, then, I accumulated materials and sketched, fleshing out the target or vehicle, still under the impression that seven or eight stanzas would see it done. There are fifty-seven. My stupidity is traceable partly to an astuteness that made me as afraid as the next man of the ferocious commitment involved in a long poem and partly to the fact that although I had my form and subject, I did not have my theme yet. This emerged, and under the triple impetus of events I won't identify, I got the poem off the ground and nearly died following it. The theme is hard to put shortly, but I will try.

An American historian somewhere observes that all colonial settlements are intensely conservative, *except* in the initial break-off point (whether religious, political, legal, or whatever). Trying to do justice to both parts of this obvious truth—which I came upon only after the poem was finished—I concentrated upon the second and the poem laid itself out in a series of rebellions. I had her rebel first against the new environment and above all against her barrenness (which in fact lasted for years), then against her marriage (which in fact seems to have been brilliantly happy), and finally against her continuing life of illness, loss, and age. These are the three large sections of the poem; they are preceded and followed by an exordium and coda, of four stanzas each, spoken by the "I" of the twentieth-century poet, which modulates into her voice, who speaks most of

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the poem. Such is the plan. Each rebellion, of course, is succeeded by submission, although even in the moment of the poem's supreme triumph—the presentment, too long to quote now, of the birth of her first child—rebellion survives. I don't remember how conceptual all this was with me during the months of composition, but I think it was to a high degree. Turbulence may take you far toward a good short poem, but it is only the first quarter mile in a long one.

Not that the going is ever exactly tranquil. I recall three occasions of special heat, the first being when I realized that the middle of the poem was going to have to be in *dialogue*, a dialogue between the seventeenth-century woman and the twentieth-century poet—a sort of extended witch-seductress and demon-lover bit. The second was a tactical solution of a problem arising out of this: how to make them in some measure physically present to each other. I gave myself one line, when she says:

A fading world I dust, with fingers new.

Later on it appears that they kiss, once, and then she says—as women will—"Talk to me." So he does, in an only half-subdued aria-stanza:

It is Spring's New England. Pussy willows wedge
up in the wet. Milky crestings, fringed
yellow, in heaven, eyed
by the melting hand-in-hand, or mere
desirers, single, heavy-footed, rapt,
make surge poor human hearts. Venus is trapt—
the hefty pike shifts, sheer—
in Orion blazing. Warblings, odours, nudge to an edge—

Noting and overconsidering such matters, few critics have seen that it is a historical poem, and it was with interest that I found Robert Lowell pronouncing it lately, in *The New York Review*, "the most resourceful historical poem in our literature." The third pleasant moment I remember is when one night, hugging myself, I decided that her fierce dogmatic old father was going to die blaspheming, in delirium.

The Bradstreet poem was printed in 1953 (as a book here in America in 1956 and in London in 1959) and a year or so later, having again taken leave of my wits, or collected them, I began a second long poem. The first installment, called *77 Dream Songs* (recently published in New York) concerns the turbulence of the

modern world, and memory, and wants. Its form comprises eighteen-line sections, three six-line stanzas, each normally (for feet) 5-5-3-5-5-3, variously rhymed and not but mostly rhymed with great strictness. The subject is a character named Henry, who also has a Friend who calls him "Mr. Bones." Here is the first section, or Song, where the "I," perhaps of the poet, disappears into Henry's first and third persons (he talks to himself in the second person, too, about himself).

Huffy Henry hid the day,
unappeasable Henry sulked.
I see his point,—a trying to put things over
It was the thought that they thought
they could do it made Henry wicked & away.
But he should have come out and talked.

All the world like a woolen lover
once did seem on Henry's side.
Then came a departure.
Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.
I don't see how Henry, pried
open for all the world to see, survived.

What he has now to say is a long
wonder the world can bear & be.
Once in a sycamore I was glad
all at the top, and I sang.
Hard on the land wears the strong sea
and empty grows every bed.

This is Number One of Book I (the first volume consists of the first three books), and editors and critics for years have been characterizing them as poems, but I do not quite see them as that; I see them as parts—admittedly more independent than parts usually are. Once one has succeeded in any degree with a long poem (votes have been cast in favour of, as well as against, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*), dread and fascination fight it out to exclude, on the whole, short poems thereafter, or so I have found it. I won't try to explain what I mean by a long poem, but let us suppose (1) a high and prolonged riskiness, (2) the construction of a world rather than the reliance upon one already existent which is available to a small poem, (3) problems of decorum most poets happily do not have to face. I cannot discuss "decorum" here either, but here is a case:

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(S)

There sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart
so heavy, if he had a hundred years
& more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time
Henry could not make good.
Starts again always in Henry's ears
the little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime.

And there is another thing he has in mind
like a grave Sienese face a thousand years
would fail to blur the still profiled reproach of. Ghastly,
with open eyes, he attends, blind.
All the bells say: too late. This is not for tears;
thinking.

But never did Henry, as he thought he did,
end anyone and hacks her body up
and hide the pieces, where they may be found.
He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing.
Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.
Nobody is ever missing.

Whether the diction of that is consistent with blackface talk, hell-spinning puns, coarse jokes, whether the end of it is funny or frightening, or both, I put up to the listener. Neither of the American poets who as reviewers have quoted it admiringly has committed himself; so I won't.

1965

The Dream Songs

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
 After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
 we ourselves flash and yearn,
 and moreover my mother told me as a boy
 (repeatingly) 'Ever to confess you're bored
 means you have no

Inner Resources.' I conclude now I have no
 inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
 Peoples bore me,
 literature bores me, especially great literature,
 Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
 as bad as achilles,

who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.
 And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
 and somehow a dog
 has taken itself & its tail considerably away
 into mountains or sea or sky, leaving
 behind: me, wag.

There sat down, once, a thing on Henry's heart
 so heavy, if he had a hundred years
 & more, & weeping, sleepless, in all them time
 Henry could not make good.
 Starts again always in Henry's ears
 the little cough somewhere, an odour, a chime.

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 like a grave Sienese face a thousand years
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But never did Henry, as he thought he did,
 end anyone and hacks her body up
 and hide the pieces, where they may be found.
 He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing.
 Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.
 Nobody is ever missing.

My mother has your shotgun. One man, wide
in the mind, and tendoned like a grizzly, pried
to his trigger-digit, pal.

He should not have done that, but, I guess,
he didn't feel the best, Sister,—felt less
and more about less than us . . . ?

Now—tell me, my love, if you recall
the dove light after dawn at the island and all—
here is the story, Jack:
he verbed for forty years, very enough,
& shot & buckt—and, baby, there was of
schist but small there (some).

Why should I tell a truth? when in the crack
of the dooming & emptying news I did hold back—
in the taxi too, sick—
silent—it's so I broke down here, in his mind
whose sire as mine one same way—I refuse,
hoping the guy go home.

Silent Song

Bright-eyed & bushy-tailed woke not Henry up.
Bright though upon his workshop shone a vise
central, moved in
while he was doing time down hospital
and growing wise.
He gave it the worst look he had left.

Alone. They all abandoned Henry—wonder! all,
when most he—under the sun.
That was all right.
He can't work well with it here, or think.
A bilocation, yellow like catastrophe.
The name of this was freedom.

Will Henry again ever be on the lookout for women & milk,
honour & love again,
have a buck or three?
He felt like shrieking but he shuddered as
(spring mist, warm, rain) an handful with quietness
vanish & the thing took hold.

I don't operate often. When I do,
persons take note.
Nurses look amazed. They pale.
The patient is brought back to life, or so.
The reason I don't do this more (I quote)
is: I have a living to fail—

because of my wife & son—to keep from earning.
—Mr Bones, I sees that.
They for these operations thanks you, what?
not pays you. —Right.
You have seldom been so understanding.
Now there is further a difficulty with the light:

I am obliged to perform in complete darkness
operations of great delicacy
on my self.

—Mr Bones, you terrifies me.
No wonder they don't pay you. Will you die?
—My

friend, I succeeded. Later.

Op. posth. no. 10

these hearings endlessly, friends, word is had
Henry may be returning to our life
adult & difficult.

There exist rumours that remote & sad
and quite beyond the knowledge of his wife
to the foothills of the cult

will come in silence this distinguished one
essaying once again the lower slopes
in triumph, keeping up our hopes,
and heading not for the highest we have done
but enigmatic faces, unsurveyed,
calm as a forest glade

for him. I only speak of what I hear
and I have said too much. He may be there
or he may groan in hospital
resuming, as the fates decree, our lot.
I would not interrupt him in whatever, in what
he's bracing him to at all.

About that 'me.' After a lecture once
came up a lady asking to see me. 'Of course.
When would you like to?'
Well, *now*, she said. 'Yes, but I have a lunch-
eon—' Then I saw her and shifted with remorse
and said 'Well; come on over.'

So we crossed to my office together and I sat her down
and asked, as she sat silent, 'What is it, miss?'

'Would you close the door?'

Now Henry was perplexed. We don't close doors
with students; it's just a principle. But this
lady looked beyond frown.

So I rose from the desk & closed it and turning back
found her in tears—apologizing—'No,
go right ahead,' I assur-
ed her, 'here's a handkerchief. Cry.' She did, I did. When she got
control, I said 'What's the matter—if you want to talk?'

'Nothing. Nothing's the matter.' So.
I am her.

Famisht Henry ate everything in sight
after his ancient fast. His fasting was voluntary,
self-imposed.

He specially liked hunks of decent bread
sopped in olive-oil & cut raw onion,
specially.

Hunger was constitutional with him,
women, cigarettes, liquor, need need need
until he went to pieces.

The pieces sat up & wrote. They did not heed
their piecedom but kept very quietly on
among the chaos.

An old old mistress recently rang up,
here in Ireland, to see how Henry was:
how was he? delighted!

He thought she was 3000 miles away,
safe with her children in New York: she's coming at five:
we'll wécome her!

Sonnets

[9]

Great citadels whereon the gold sun falls
Miss you O Chris sequestered to the West
Which wears you Mayday lily at its breast,
Part and not part, proper to balls and brawls,
Plains, cities, or the yellow shore, not false
Anywhere, free, native and Danishest
Profane and elegant flower,—whom suggest
Frail and not frail, blond rocks and madrigals.

Once in the car (cave of our radical love)
Your darker hair I saw than golden hair
Above your thighs whiter than white-gold hair,
And where the dashboard lit faintly your least
Enlarged scene, O the midnight bloomed . . . the East
Less gorgeous, wearing you like a long white glove!

[10]

You in your stone home where the sycamore
More than I see you sees you, where luck's grass
Smoothes your bare feet more often, even your glass
Touches your palm and tips to your lips to pour
Whatever is in it into you, through which door
O moving softness do you just now pass—
Your slippers' brows curled, red and old—alas
With what soft thought for me, at sea, and sore?

Stone of our situation! iron and stone,
Younger as days to years than the house, yet might
We stare as little haggard with time's roil . . .
Who in each other's arms have lain—lie—one
Bite like an animal, both do, pause, and bite,
Shudder with joy, kiss . . . the broad waters boil!

[75]

Sonnets to Chris

[61]

(10)
Languid the songs I wish I willed . . . I try . . .
Smooth songs untroubled like a silver spoon
To pour your creamy beauty back, warm croon
Blind, soft . . . but I have something in my eye,
I see by fits, see what there, rapid and sly,
Difficult, so that it will be off soon,
I'd better fix it! frantic as a loon,
Smarting, world-churned, some convulsed song I cry.

Well . . . (also I plead, I have something in mind,
My bobsled need, the need for me you'll find
If you look deeper: study our winter-scene) . . .
Thinking is well, but worse still to be caught
The wholly beautiful just beyond thought,—
Small trees in mist far down an endless green!

[62]

Tyranny of your car—so far resembles
Beachwagons all, all with officious hope
Conscript my silly eyes—offers a trope
For your grand sway upon these months my shambles:
Your cleaver now to other women's brambles
I'll not contrast—no, all of you have scope,
Teeth breasts tongues thighs eyes hair: as rope to rope
You point to point compare, and the subject trembles.

What makes you then this ominous wide blade
I'd run from O unless I bleat to die?
Nothing: you are not: woman blonde, called Chris.
It is I lope to be your sheep, to wade
Thick in my cordial blood, to howl and sigh
As I decide . . . if I could credit this.

[101]

Sonnets to Chris

[115]

As usual I'm up before the sun
begins to warm this intolerable place
and I have stared all night upon your face
but am not wiser thereby. Everyone
rattles his weakness or his thing undone,
I shake you like a rat. Open disgrace
yawns all before me: have I left a trace,
a spoor? Clouding it over, I look for my gun.

She's hidden it. I won't sing on of that.
Whiskey is bracing. Failures are my speed,
I thrive on ends, the dog is at the door
in heat, the neighbourhood is male except one cat
and they thresh on my stoop. Prevent my need,
Someone, and come & find me on the floor.

[116]

Outlaws claw mostly to a riddled end,
the close of their stories known. The cause of our story
which led us up from Hell to Purgatory,
then again downwards, has been fully penned
and stands mysterious: what lawyer will defend
there hopeless lovers with their eyes set on glory
for whom one tryst a week is satisfactory
but we can't have that, merely. Shall I let it depend

on the weather & her moods, my waking up,
my cycling speed? or let it all go smash
in a welter of despair & suicides?
I stand off. I will the matter to a stop.
After the brightness, on Monday night the trash.
I am a savant of the problem on both sides.

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[117]

(11)
All we were going strong last night this time,
the ~~mot~~ were flying & the frozen daiquiris
were downing, supine on the floor lay Lise
listening to Schubert grievous & sublime,
my head was frantic with a following rime:
it was a good evening, an evening to please,
I kissed her in the kitchen—ecstasies—
among so much good we tamped down the crime.

The weather's changing. This morning was cold,
as I made for the grove, without expectation,
some hundred Sonnets in my pocket, old,
to read her if she came. Presently the sun
yellowed the pines & my lady came not
in blue jeans & a sweater. I sat down & wrote.

Judges xvi.22

[129]

Sonnets to Chris

since in that case where the hell was *I*?
but what instead *did I* want it to sound like?

I couldn't sleep at night, I attribute my life-long insomnia
to my uterine struggles. 'You must undress'
a young poet writes to me from Oregon
'the great face of the body.'

The Isolation so, young & now I find older,
American, & other.
While the rest of England was strolling thro' the Crystal Palace
Arnold was gnashing his teeth on a mountain in Sicily.

An eccentric friend, a Renaissance scholar, sixty-odd,
unworldly, he writes limericks in Medieval Latin,
stood up in the rowboat fishing to take a leak
& exclaimed as he was about it with excitement

'I wish my penis was big enough for this whole lake!'
My phantasy precisely at twenty:
to satisfy at once all Barnard & Smith
& have enough left over for Miss Gibbs's girls.

Olympus

In my serpentine researches
I came on a book review in *Poetry*
which began, with sublime assurance,
a comprehensive air of majesty,

'The art of poetry
is amply distinguished from the manufacture of verse
by the animating presence in the poetry
of a fresh idiom: language

so twisted & posed in a form
that it not only expresses the matter in hand
but adds to the stock of available reality.'
I was never altogether the same man after *that*.

12
I found this new Law-giver all unknown
except in the back numbers of a Cambridge quarterly
Hound & Horn, just defunct.
I haunted on Sixth Avenue until

at 15¢ apiece or 25
I had all 28 numbers
& had fired my followers at Philolexian & Boar's Head
with the merits of this prophet.

My girls suffered during this month or so,
so did my seminars & lectures &
my poetry even. To be a *critic*, ah,
how deeper & more scientific.

I wrote & printed an essay on Yeats's plays
re-deploying all of Blackmur's key terms
& even his sentence-structure wherever I could.
When he answered by hand from Boston my nervous invitation

to come & be honoured at our annual Poetry Reading,
it must have been ten minutes before I could open the envelope.
I got *him* to review Tate's book of essays
& *Mark* to review *The Double Agent*. Olympus!

I have travelled in some high company since
less dizzily.
I have had some rare girls since but never one so philosophical
as that same Spring (my last Spring there) Jean Bennett.

Nowhere

Traitoring words,—tearing my thought across
bearing it to foes.
Two men ahead of me in line in the College Study
about the obscurity of my 'Elegy: Hart Crane'.

More comfortable at the Apollo among blacks
than in Hartley Hall where I hung out.

& Goguel & McNeile
& Bultmann even & later Archbishop Carrington.

The Miracles were a stumbling-block;
until I read Karl Heim, trained in natural science;
until I had sufficiently attended to
The Transfiguration & The Ecstasy.

I was weak on the Fourth Gospel. I still am,
in places; I plan to amend that.

Wellisch on *Isaac & Oedipus*
supplements for me Kierkegaard.

Luther on *Galatians* (his grand joy)
I laid aside until I was older & wiser.
Bishop Andrewes' account of the Resurrection-appearances
in 1609 seemed to me, seems to me, it.

I studied Titian's remarks on The Tribute-Money.
Bishop Westcott's analysis (it took him 25 years)
of the first eighteen verses of *St. John*
struck me as of a cunning like Odysseus'.

And other systems, high & primitive,
ancient & surviving, did I not neglect,
sky-gods & trickster-gods, gods impotent,
the malice & force of the dead.

When at twelve Einstein lost belief in God
he said to himself at once (as he put it later)
'Similarly motivated men, both of the past & of the present,
together with their achieved insights,
waren die unverlierbaren Freunde'—the unloseable friends.

Message

Amplitude,—voltage,—the one friend calls for the one,
the other for the other, in my work;

in verse & prose. Well, hell.
I am not writing an autobiography-in-verse, my friends.

13
Impressions, structures, tales, from Columbia in the Thirties
& the Michaelmas term at Cambridge in '36,
followed by some later. It's not my life.
That's occluded & lost.

That consisted of lectures on St Paul,
scrimmages with women, singular moments
of getting certain things absolutely right.
Laziness, liquor, bad dreams.

That consisted of three wives & many friends,
whims & emergencies, discoveries, losses.
It's been a long trip. Would I make it again?
But once a Polish belle bared me out & was kind to it.

I don't remember why I sent this message.
Children! children! form the point of all.
Children & high art.
Money in the bank is also something.

We will all die, & the evidence
is: Nothing after that.
Honey, we don't rejoin.
The thing meanwhile, I suppose, is to be courageous & kind.

Relations

I feel congruity, feel colleagueship
with few even of my fine contemporaries
Cal, Saul, Elizabeth,
modestly Meredith, not yet quite good Deneen Peckinpah

inditing a dirty novel in Montreal.
Bhain Campbell was extracted from me
in dolor, yellow as a second sheet
& I have not since tried to resume the same.

Henry By Night

Henry's nocturnal habits were the terror of his women.
First it appears he snored, lying on his back.
Then he thrashed & tossed,
changing position like a task fleet. Then, inhuman,
he woke every hour or so—they couldn't keep track
of mobile Henry, lost

at 3 a.m., off for more drugs or a cigarette,
reading old mail, writing new letters, scribbling
excessive Songs;
back then to bed, to the old tune or get set
for a stercoraceous cough, without quibbling
death-like. His women's wrongs

they hoarded & forgave, mysterious, sweet;
but you'll admit it was no way to live
or even keep alive.
I won't mention the dreams I won't repeat
sweating & shaking: something's gotta give:
up for good at five.

Henry's Understanding

He was reading late, at Richard's, down in Maine,
aged 32? Richard & Helen long in bed,
my good wife long in bed.
All I had to do was strip & get into my bed,
putting the marker in the book, & sleep,
& wake to a hot breakfast.

Off the coast was an island, P'tit Manaan,
the bluff from Richard's lawn was almost sheer.
A chill at four o'clock.
It only takes a few minutes to make a man.

A concentration upon now & here.
Suddenly, unlike Bach,

& horribly, unlike Bach, it occurred to me
that *one* night, instead of warm pajamas,
I'd take off all my clothes
& cross the damp cold lawn & down the bluff
into the terrible water & walk forever
under it out toward the island.

(K)

Defensio in Extremis

I said: Mighty men have encamped against me,
and they have questioned not only the depth of my defences
but my sincerity.
Now, Father, let them have it.

Thou knowest, however their outcry & roar,
in a study of stillness I read my single heart
after my collapsed returning.
Oh even A, great E, & tender M

splinter at my immusical procedures & crude loves.
Surely some spiritual life is not what it might be?
Surely they are half-ful of it?
Tell them to leave me damned well alone with my misunderstood
orders.

Damn You, Jim D., You Woke Me Up

I thought I'd say a thing to please myself
& why not him, about his talent, to him
or to some friend who'd maybe pass it on
because he printed a sweet thing about me
a long long time ago, & because of gladness
to see a good guy *get out* of the advertising racket
& suddenly make like the Great Chicago Fire—
yes that was it, fine, fine—(this was a dream