

The Poet's Essay.

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Poets, Critics, and Readers



THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR, SUMMER 1959

PEOPLE often ask me: "Is there any poet who makes his living writing poetry?" and I have to say: "No." The public has an unusual relationship to the poet: it doesn't even know that he is there. Our public is a rich and generous one; if it knew that the poet was there, it would pay him for being there. As it is, poets make their living in many ways: by being obstetricians, like William Carlos Williams; or directors of Faber and Faber, like T. S. Eliot; or vice-presidents of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, like Wallace Stevens. But most poets, nowadays, make their living by teaching. Kepler said, "God gives every animal a way to make its living, and He has given the astronomer astrology"; and now, after so many centuries, He has given us poets students. But what He gives with one hand He takes away with the other: He has taken away our readers.

Yet the poet can't help looking at what he has left, his students, with gratitude. His job may be an impossible one—there are three impossible tasks, said Freud: to teach, to govern, and to cure—but what is there so grateful as impossibility? and what is there better to teach, more nearly impossible to teach, than poems and stories? As Lord Macaulay says: "For how can man live better / Than facing fearful odds / For the poems of his fathers—"

I seem to have remembered it a little wrong, but it's a natural error. And, today, when we get people to read poems—to read very much of anything—naturally and joyfully, to read it not as an unnatural rightness but as a natural error: what people always have done, always will do—we do it against fearful odds. I can't imagine a better way for the poet to make his living. I certainly can't imagine his making his living by writing poems—I'm not *that* imaginative. I'm used to things as they are.

But there is a passage in Wordsworth that I read, always, with a rueful smile. He is answering the question, *Why write in verse?* He gives several reasons. His final reason, he writes, "is all that is nec-

essary to say upon this subject." Here it is, all that it is *necessary* to say upon this subject: "Few persons will deny, that of two descriptions, either of passions, manners, or characters, each of them equally well executed, the one in prose and the other in verse, the verse will be read a hundred times where the prose is read once."

One sees sometimes, carved on geology buildings: *O Earth, what changes thou hast seen!* When a poet finishes reading this passage from Wordsworth, he thinks in miserable awe: *O Earth, what changes thou hast seen!* Only a hundred and fifty years ago *this* is what people were like. Nowadays, of course, the prose will be read a thousand times where the verse is read once. And this seems to everybody only natural; the situation Wordsworth describes seems unnatural, improbable, almost impossible. What Douglas Bush writes is true: we live in "a time in which most people assume that, as an eminent social scientist once said to me, 'Poetry is on the way out.'" To most of us verse, any verse, is so ungenial, so exhaustively artificial, that I have often thought that a man could make his fortune by entirely eliminating from our culture verse of any kind: in the end there would be no more poems, only prose translations of them. This man could begin by publishing his Revised Standard Version of *Mother Goose*: without rhyme, meter, or other harmful adulterants; with no word of anything but honest American prose, prose that cats and dogs can read.

A friend of mine once took a famous Italian scholar on a tour of New Haven. She specialized in objects of art and virtue—samplers, figureheads, paintings of women under willows, statues of General Washington—but no matter what she showed him, the man would only wave his hand in the air and exclaim: *Ridickalus!* And shouldn't we feel so about things like *Mother Goose*?

*Early to bed and early to rise
Makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.*

Ridickalus! Why say it like a rocking horse? why make it jingle so? and *wise*—who wants to be wise?

*Which sibling is the well-adjusted sibling?
The one that gets its sleep.*

That is the way the modern *Mother Goose* will put it. I don't expect the modern *Mother Goose* to be especially popular with little children, who have not yet learned not to like poetry; but it is the parents who buy the book.

Isn't writing verse a dying art, anyway, like blacksmithing or buggy-making? Well, not exactly: poets are making as many buggies as ever—good buggies, fine buggies—they just can't get anybody much to ride in them. As for blacksmithing: I read the other day that there are twice as many blacksmith shops in the United States as there are bookstores. Something has gone wrong with that comparison too. No, I'm doing what poets do, complaining; and if I exaggerate a little when I complain, why, that's only human—surely you want me to exaggerate a little, in my misery. Goethe says, when he is talking about slum children: "No person ever looks miserable who feels that he has the right to make a demand on you." This right is not anything that anyone can confer upon himself; it is the public, society, all of us, that confer this right. If the poet looks miserable, it is because we have made him feel that he no longer has the right to make a demand on us. It is no longer a question of what he wants, or of what he ought to be given—he takes what he gets, and complains about getting it, and he hears the echo of his complaint, and then the silence settles around him, a little darker, a little deeper.

What does he want? To be read. Read by whom? critics? men wise enough to tell him, when they have read the poem, what it is and ought to be, what its readers feel and ought to feel? Well, no. A writer cannot learn about his readers from his critics: they are different races. The critic, unless he is one in a thousand, reads to criticize; the reader reads to read.

Freud talks of the "free-floating" or "evenly-hovering" attention with which the analyst must listen to the patient. Concentration, noting, listening with a set—a set of pigeonholes—makes it difficult or impossible for the analyst's unconscious to respond to the patient's; takes away from the analyst the possibility of learning from the patient what the analyst doesn't already know; takes away from him all those random guesses or intuitions or inspirations which come out of nowhere—and come, too, out of the truth of the patient's being. But this is quite as true of critics and the poems that are *their* patients: when one reads as a linguist, a scholar, a New or Old or High or Low critic, when one reads the poem as *a means to an end*, one is no longer a pure reader but an applied one. The true reader "listens like a three years' child: / The Mariner hath his will." Later on he may write like a sixty-three-year-old sage, but he knows that in the beginning, unless ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of art. Hofmannsthal says, with awful finality: "The world

has lost its innocence, and without innocence no one creates or enjoys a work of art"; but elsewhere he says more hopefully, with entire and not with partial truth, that each of us lives in an innocence of his own which he never entirely loses.

Is there a public for poetry that is still, in this sense of the word, innocent? Of course, there are several publics for poetry—small, benighted, eccentric publics—just as there are publics for postage stamps and cobblers' benches; but this is such a disastrous change from the days of *Childe Harold* and *In Memoriam* and *Hiawatha*, when the public for poetry was, simply, the reading public, that you can see why poets feel the miserable astonishment that they feel. The better-known poets feel it more than the lesser-known, who—poor things—lie under the table grateful for crumbs, pats, kicks, anything at all that will let them be sure they really exist, and are not just a dream someone has stopped dreaming. A poet like Auden says that nobody reads him except poets and young men in cafeterias—his description of the young men is too repellent for me to repeat it to you.

Literally, Auden is wrong: we read Auden, this is no cafeteria; but, figuratively, Auden is right—the poet's public's gone. Frederick the Great translated Voltaire, and trembled as the poet read the translation; Elizabeth—Elizabeth the First—and Henry the Eighth and Richard the Lion-Hearted wrote good poems and read better; and I cannot resist quoting to you three or four sentences from Frans Bengtsson's novel *The Long Ships*, to show you what things were like at the court of Harald Blutooth, King of Denmark in the year 1000. A man gets up from a banquet table: "His name was Björn Asbrandsson, and he was a famous warrior, besides being a great poet to boot . . . Although he was somewhat drunk, he managed to improvise some highly skilful verses in King Harald's honor in a meter known as *töglag*. This was the latest and most difficult verse-form that the Icelandic poets had invented, and indeed the poem was so artfully contrived that little could be understood of its content. Everybody, however, listened with an appearance of understanding, for any man who could not understand poetry would be regarded as a poor specimen of a warrior; and King Harald praised the poet and gave him a gold ring."

Auden is a descendant of just such poets as this one; but if Auden, when he next visits the University of your state, makes up an incomprehensible poem, in a difficult new meter, in honor of the President of the University, will all its football players pretend they

understand the poem, so as not to be thought poor specimens of football players? and will the President give Auden a gold ring?

In the days when his readers couldn't read, the poet judged his public by his public: the gold ring or the scowl the king gave him was as concrete as the labored, triumphant faces of his hearers. But nowadays King Harald and his warriors are represented by a reviewer, next year, in *The New York Times*; a critic, nine years later, in *The Sewanee Review*. "Ah, better to sing my songs to a wolf pack on the Seonsee than to a professor on the *Sewanee*!" the poet blurts, baring his teeth; but then—what choice has he?—he lets the Reality Principle do its worst, and projects or extends or extrapolates a critic or two, a dozen reviewers, into the Public; into Posterity. Critics, alas! are the medium through which the poet darkly senses his public. Nor is it altogether different for the public: Harald and his Vikings, lonely in their split-levels, do not even remember the days when, as they listened, they could look into one another's faces and know without looking what they would find there. Now they too look into the *Times*; wish that they could replace that scowl with a gold ring, that gold ring with a scowl; reconstruct from the exclamations on dust jackets, quotations in advertisements, the fierce smiles on the faces of the warriors.

So if we are to talk about the poet and his poems and his public, what each is to the others, we must spend much of our time—too much of our time—talking about his critics. Criticism is necessary, I suppose; I know. Yet criticism, to the poet, is no necessity, but a luxury he can ill afford. Conrad cried to his wife: "I don't want criticism, I want praise!" And it is praise, blame, tears, laughter, that writers want; when Columbus comes home he needs to be cheered for finding a new way to India, not interned while the officials argue about whether it is Asia, Africa, or Antarctica that he has discovered. Really, of course, it's America—and if they agreed about it this would be helpful to Columbus; he could say to himself, in awe: "So it was America I discovered!" But how seldom the critics do agree! A gray writer seems black to his white critics, white to his black critics: the same poem will seem incomprehensible modernistic nonsense to Robert Hillyer, and a sober, old-fashioned, versified essay to the critics of some little magazine of advanced tastes. Ordinary human feeling, the most natural tenderness, will seem to many critics and readers rank sentimentality, just as a kind of nauseated brutality (in which the writer's main response to the world is simply to vomit) will seem to many critics and readers the inescapable truth. We live in a time in which Hofmannsthal's "Good

taste is the ability continuously to counteract exaggeration" will seem to most readers as false as it seems tame. "Each epoch has its own sentimentality," Hofmannsthal goes on, "its specific way of overemphasizing strata of emotion. The sentimentality of the present is egotistic and unloving; it exaggerates not the feeling of love but that of the self."

Everyone speaks of the "negative capability" of the artist, of his ability to lose what self he has in the many selves, the great self of the world. Such a quality is, surely, the first that a critic should have; yet who speaks of the negative capability of the critic? how often are we able to observe it? The commonest response to the self of a work of art is the critic's assertion that he too has a self. What he writes proves it. I once saw, in an essay by a psychoanalyst, the phrase *the artist and his competitor, the critic*. Where got he that truth? Out of an analyst's mouth? I do not know; but that it is an important and neglected truth I do know. All mediators become competitors: the exceptions to this rule redeem their kind.

Critics disagree about almost every quality of a writer's work; and when some agree about a quality, they disagree about whether it is to be praised or blamed, nurtured or rooted out. After enough criticism the writer is covered with lipstick and bruises, and the two are surprisingly evenly distributed. There is *nothing* so plain about a writer's books, to some critics, that its opposite isn't plain to others. Kafka is original? Not at all, according to Edmund Wilson. A fine critic of poetry, Ezra Pound, writes: "In [the writer So-and-So] you have an embroidery of language, a talk *about* the matter, not presentation; you have grace, richness of language, etc., as much as you like, but you have nothing that isn't replaceable by something else, no ornament that wouldn't have done just as well in some other connection, or that for which some other figure of rhetoric or fancy couldn't have served, or which couldn't have been distilled from literary antecedents." About whom is Pound speaking? About Shakespeare. Anyone who has read at all widely has come across thousands of such judgments, and it is easy for him to sympathize with the artist when the artist murmurs: "We wish to learn from our critics, but it is hard for us even to recover from them. A fool's reproach has an edge like a razor, and his brother's praise is small consolation. Critics are like bees: one sting lasts longer than a dozen jars of honey."

The best thing ever said about criticism—I am not, now, speaking as a critic—was said, as is often the case, by Goethe: "Against criticism we can neither protect nor defend ourselves; we must act in despite of

it, and gradually it resigns itself to this." The great Goethe suffered just as we little creatures do, and he spoke about it, as we don't, in imperishable sentences: "All great excellence in life or art, at its first recognition, brings with it a certain pain arising from the strongly felt inferiority of the spectator; only at a later period, when we take it into our own culture, and appropriate as much of it as our capacities allow, do we learn to love and esteem it. Mediocrity, on the other hand, may often give us unqualified pleasure; it does not disturb our self-satisfaction, but rather encourages us with the thought that we are as good as another . . . Properly speaking, we learn only from those books we cannot judge. The author of a book that I am competent to criticize would have to learn from me." Goethe says over and over: "Nothing is more terrible than ignorance in action . . . It is a terrible thing when fools thrive at the expense of a superior man." You and I will agree—and then we will have to decide whether we're being thriven at the expense of, or thriving. Goethe says in firm doggerel: "However clear and simple be it / Finder and doer alone may see it." No, Goethe didn't have too much use for critics, since he thought that critics weren't of too much use.

And why am I quoting all this to you? have critics hurt me so that I want to pull down the temple upon their heads, even if I too perish in the ruins?—for I too am a critic. No, it's not that; critics have done their best for me, and their best has been, perhaps, only too good; when I myself criticize, I am willing for you to believe what I say; but I am trying to explain why it is that critics are of so little use to writers, why it is that they are such a poor guide to the opinions of the next age—and I am explaining in an age which has an unprecedented respect for, trust in, criticism.

All of us have read pieces of criticism—many pieces of criticism—which seem worthy both of delighted respect and cautious trust. All of us have read criticism in which the critic takes it for granted that what he writes about comes first, and what he writes comes second—takes it for granted that he is writing as a reader to other readers, to be of use to them; criticism in which the critic works, as far as he is able, in the spirit of Wordsworth's "I have endeavored to look steadily at my subject." All of us have some favorite, exceptional critic who might say, with substantial truth, that he has not set up rigid standards to which a true work of art must conform, but that he has tried instead to let the many true works of art—his experience of them—set up the general expectations to which his criticism of art conforms; that he has tried never to see a work of art as mere raw

material for criticism, data for generalization; that he has tried never to forget the difference between creating a work of art and criticizing a work of art; and that he has tried, always, to remember what Proust meant when he said, about writers like Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, Flaubert, the great creators called "romantics": "The classics have no better commentators than the 'romantics.' The romantics are the only people who really know how to read the classics, because they read them as they were written, that is to say, 'romantically' and because if one would read a poet or a prose writer properly one must be, not a scholar, but a poet or a prose writer." It might be put a little differently: if one would read a poet or a prose writer properly one must be, not a scholar or a poet or a prose writer, but a reader: someone who reads books as they were written, that is to say, "romantically." Proust's grandmother was not a poet or a prose writer, but she read Madame de Sévigné properly. To be, as she was, a reader, is a lofty and no longer common fate.

The best poetry critic of our time, T. S. Eliot, has said about his criticism: "I see that I wrote best about poets whose work had influenced my own, and with whose poetry I had become thoroughly familiar, long before I desired to write about them, or had found the occasion to do so . . . The best of my literary criticism . . . is a by-product of my private poetry-workshop." But perhaps something of this sort is always true: perhaps true criticism is something, like sincerity or magnanimity, that cannot be aimed at, attained, directly; that must always be, in some sense, a by-product, whether of writing or reading, of a private poetry-workshop or a private reading-room.

We all realize that writers are inspired, but helpless and fallible beings, who know not what they write; readers, we know from personal experience, are less inspired but no less helpless and fallible beings, who half the time don't know what they're reading. Now, a critic is half writer, half reader: just as the vices of men and horses met in centaurs, the weaknesses of readers and writers meet in critics. A good critic—we cannot help seeing, when we look back at any other age—is a much rarer thing than a good poet or a good novelist. Unless you are one critic in a hundred thousand, the future will quote you only as an example of the normal error of the past, what everybody was foolish enough to believe then. Critics are discarded like calendars; yet, for their year, with what trust the world regards them!

Art is long, and critics are the insects of a day. But while he survives, it is the work of art he criticizes which is the critic's muse, or daemon, or guardian angel: it is a delight to the critic to think that

sometimes, in moments of particular good fortune, some poem by Rilke or Yeats or Wordsworth has hovered above him, whispering what to say about it in his ear. And, in the moments of rash ambition which can come even to such humble—rightly humble—things as critics, the critic can imagine some reader, in the midst of his pleasure at a poem or story the critic has guided him to, being willing to think of some paragraph of the critic's work in terms of a sentence of Goethe's: "There is a sensitive empiricism that ultimately identifies itself with the object and thereby becomes genuine theory."

In other moments the critic can imagine the reader's thinking of him in terms of a paragraph that Proust once wrote. That miraculous writer and great critic, distressed at someone's having referred to Sainte-Beuve as one of the "great guides," exclaimed: "Surely no one ever failed so completely as did he in performing the functions of a guide? The greater part of his *Lundis* are devoted to fourth-rate writers, and whenever, by chance, he does bring himself to speak of somebody really important, of Flaubert, for instance, or Baudelaire, he immediately atones for what grudging praise he may have accorded him by letting it be understood that he writes as he does about them simply because he wants to please men who are his personal friends . . . As to Stendhal, the novelist, the Stendhal of *La Chartreuse*, our 'guide' laughs out of court the idea that such a person ever existed, and merely sees in all the talk about him the disastrous effects of an attempt (foredoomed to failure) to foist Stendhal on the public as a novelist . . . It would be fun, had I not less important things to do, to 'brush in' (as Monsieur Cuvillier Fleury would have said), in the manner of Sainte-Beuve, a 'picture of French literature in the nineteenth century,' in such a way that not a single great name would appear and men would be promoted to the position of outstanding authors whose books today have been completely forgotten."

A portion of any critic, as he reads these sentences, turns white; and if another portion whispers, "Ah, but *you* needn't be afraid; certainly *you're* not as bad a critic as Sainte-Beuve," it is not a sentence to bring the color back into his cheeks, unless he blushes easily.

Wordsworth said, as Proust said after him, that "every writer, in so far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed: so is it, so will it continue to be." But *taste*, he goes on to say, is a vicious and deluding word. (And surely he is right; surely we should use, instead, a phrase like *imaginative judgment*.) Using such a word as *taste* helps to make us believe that there is some passive faculty that responds to the new work

of art, registering the work's success or failure; but actually the new work must call forth in us an active power analogous to that which created it—the reader “cannot proceed in quiescence, he cannot be carried like a dead weight,” he must “exert himself” to feel, to sympathize, and to understand. “*There*,” as Wordsworth says, “lies the true difficulty.” He is right: *there* lies the difficulty for us, whether we are critics or readers; so is it, so will it continue to be.

You may say, “Of course this is true of great and original talents, but how does it apply to the trivial, immature, and eccentric writers with whom our age, like any other, is infested?” It applies only in this way: some of these trivial, immature, and eccentric writers *are* our great and original talents. The readers of Wordsworth’s age said, “Of course what he says is true of great and original talents, but it is absurd when applied to a trivial and eccentric creature like Wordsworth”; and the critics of Wordsworth’s age, applying the standards of the age more clearly, forcibly, and self-consciously, could condemn him with a more drastic severity. The readers read to read, the critics read to judge—both were wrong, but the critics were more impressively and rigorously and disastrously wrong, since they confirmed most readers in their dislike of Wordsworth and scared most of the others out of their liking.

We all see that the writer cannot afford to listen to critics when they are wrong—though how is he, how are we, to know when they are wrong? Can he afford to listen to them when they are right?—though how is he, how are we, to know when they are right? and right for this age or right for the next? * The writer cannot afford to question his own essential nature; must have, as Marianne Moore says, “the courage of his peculiarities.” But often it is this very nature, these very peculiarities—originality always seems peculiarity, to begin with—that critics condemn. There must be about the writer a certain spontaneity or naïveté or somnambulistic rightness: he must, in some sense, move unquestioning in the midst of his world—at his question all will disappear.

And if it is slighter things, alterable things which the critics condemn, should the poet give in, alter them, and win his critics’ surprised approval? “No,” says Wordsworth, “where the understanding of an

* “When the great innovation appears, it will almost certainly be in a muddled, incomplete, and confusing form. To the discoverer himself it will be only half-understood; to everybody else it will be a mystery. For any speculation which does not at first glance look crazy, there is no hope.”

F. I. Dyson, *Innovation in Physics*

author is not convinced, or his feelings altered, this cannot be done without great injury to himself: for his own feelings are his stay and support, and, if he set them aside in this one instance, he may be induced to repeat this act till his mind shall lose all confidence in itself, and become utterly debilitated. To this it may be added, that the critic ought never to forget that he is himself exposed to the same errors as the Poet.” Let me repeat this: we ought never to forget that the critic is himself exposed to the same errors as the poet. We all know this—yet, in a deeper sense, we don’t know it. We all realize that the poet’s beliefs are, first of all, *his*: our books show how his epoch, his childhood, his mistresses, and his unconscious produced the beliefs; we know, now, the “real” reasons for his believing what he believed. Why do we not realize what is equally true (and equally false)?—that the critic’s beliefs are, first of all, *his*; that we can write books showing how his epoch, his mistresses, and his unconscious produced the beliefs; that we can know, now, the “real” reasons for his believing what he believed. The work of criticism is rooted in the unconscious of the critic just as the poem is rooted in the unconscious of the poet. I have had the pleasure and advantage of knowing many poets, many critics, and I have not found one less deeply neurotic than the other.

When the critic is also an artist—a T. S. Eliot—we find it easier to remember all this, and to distrust him; but when the critic is an Irving Babbitt—that is to say, a man who, tenanted by all nine of the muses, still couldn’t create a couplet—we tend to think of his beliefs as somehow more objective. “Surely,” we feel, “a man with so little imagination couldn’t be making up something—couldn’t be *inspired*.” We are wrong. Criticism is the poetry of prosaic natures (and even, in our time, of some poetic ones); there is a divinity that inspires the most sheep-like of scholars, the most tabular of critics, so that the man too dull to understand *Evangeline* still can be possessed by some theory about *Evangeline*, a theory as just to his own being as it is unjust to *Evangeline*’s. The man is entitled to his inspiration; and yet . . . if only he would leave out *Evangeline*! If only he could secede from Literature, and set up some metaliterary kingdom of his own!

The poet *needs* to be deluded about his poems—for who can be sure that it is delusion? In his strongest hours the public hardly exists for the writer: he does what he ought to do, has to do, and if afterwards some Public wishes to come and crown him with laurel crowns, well, let it! if critics wish to tell people all that he isn’t, well, let them—he knows what he is. But at night when he can’t get to sleep it seems to him that it is what he is, his own particular personal quality,

that he is being disliked for. It is this that the future will like him for, if it likes him for anything; but will it like him for anything? The poet's hope is in posterity, but it is a pale hope; and now that posterity itself has become a pale hope . . .

The writer—I am still talking about the writer-not-yet-able-to-go-to-sleep—is willing to have his work disliked, if it's bad; is ready to rest content in dislike, if it's good. But which is it? *He* can't know. He thinks of all those pieces of his that he once thought good, and now thinks bad; how many of his current swans will turn out to be just such ducklings? All of them? If he were worse, would people like him better? If he were better, would people like him worse? If—

He says to himself, "Oh, go to sleep!" And next morning, working at something the new day has brought, he is astonished at the night's thoughts—he does what he does, and lets public, critics, posterity worry about whether it's worth doing. For to tell the truth, the first truth, the poem is a love affair between the poet and his subject, and readers come in only a long time later, as witnesses at the wedding . . .

But what would the ideal witnesses—the ideal public—be? What would an ideal public do? Mainly, essentially, it would just read the poet; read him with a certain willingness and interest; read him imaginatively and perceptively. It needs him, even if it doesn't know that; he needs it, even if he doesn't know that. It and he are like people in one army, one prison, one world: their interests are great and common, and deserve a kind of declaration of dependence. The public might treat him very much as it would like him to treat it. It has its faults, he has his; but both "are, after all," as a man said about women, "the best things that are offered in that line." The public ought not to demand the same old thing from the poet whenever he writes something very new, nor ought it to complain, *The same old thing!* whenever he writes something that isn't very new; and it ought to realize that it is not, unfortunately, in the writer's power to control what he writes: something else originates and controls it, whether you call that something else the unconscious or Minerva or the Muse. The writer writes what he writes just as the public likes what it likes; he can't help himself, it can't help itself, but each of them has to try: most of our morality, most of our culture are in the trying.

We readers can be, or at least can want to be, what the writer himself would want us to be: a public that reads a *lot*—that reads widely, joyfully, and naturally; a public whose taste is formed by acquaintance with the good and great writers of many ages, and not simply acquaint-

tance with a few fashionable contemporaries and the fashionable precursors of those; a public with broad general expectations, but without narrow particular demands, that the new work of art must satisfy; a public that reads with the calm and ease and independence that come from liking things in themselves, for themselves.

This is the kind of public that the poet would like; and if it turned out to be the kind of public that wouldn't like him, why, surely that is something he could bear. It is not his poems but poetry that he wants people to read; if they will read Rilke's and Yeats's and Hardy's poems, he can bear to have his own poems go unread forever. He *knows* that their poems are good to read, and that's something he necessarily can't know about his own; and he knows, too, that poetry itself is good to read—that if you cannot read poetry easily and naturally and joyfully, you are cut off from much of the great literature of the past, some of the good literature of the present. Yet the poet could bear to have people cut off from all that, if only they read widely, naturally, joyfully in the rest of literature: much of the greatest literature, much of the greatest poetry, even, is in prose. If people read this prose—read even a little of it—generously and imaginatively, and felt it as truth and life, as a natural and proper joy, why, that would be enough.

A few months ago I read an interview with a critic; a well-known critic; an unusually humane and intelligent critic. The interviewer had just said that the critic "sounded like a happy man," and the interview was drawing to a close; the critic said, ending it all: "I read, but I don't get time to read at whim. All the reading I do is in order to write or teach, and I resent it. We have no TV, and I don't listen to the radio or records, or go to art galleries or the theater. I'm a completely negative personality."

As I thought of that busy, artless life—no records, no paintings, no plays, no books except those you lecture on or write articles about—I was so depressed that I went back over the interview looking for some bright spot, and I found it, one beautiful sentence: for a moment I had left the gray, dutiful world of the professional critic, and was back in the sunlight and shadow, the unconsidered joys, the unreasoned sorrows, of ordinary readers and writers, amateurishly reading and writing "at whim." The critic said that once a year he read *Kim*; and he read *Kim*, it was plain, at whim: not to teach, not to criticize, just for love—he read it, as Kipling wrote it, just because he liked to, wanted to, couldn't help himself. To him it wasn't a means to a lecture or an article, it was an end; he read it not for anything he could

get out of it, but for itself. And isn't this what the work of art demands of us? The work of art, Rilke said, says to us always: *You must change your life*. It demands of us that we too see things as ends, not as means—that we too know them and love them for their own sake. This change is beyond us, perhaps, during the active, greedy, and powerful hours of our lives; but during the contemplative and sympathetic hours of our reading, our listening, our looking, it is surely within our power, if we choose to make it so, if we choose to let one part of our nature follow its natural desires. So I say to you, for a closing sentence: *Read at whim! read at whim!*

The Woman at the Washington Zoo



UNDERSTANDING POETRY, EDITED BY CLEANTH BROOKS AND
ROBERT PENN WARREN, THIRD EDITION, 1960

Critics fairly often write essays about how some poem was written; the poet who wrote it seldom does. When Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks were making a new edition of *Understanding Poetry*, they asked several poets to write such essays. I no longer remembered much about writing "The Woman at the Washington Zoo"—a poem is, so to speak, a way of making you forget how you wrote it—but I had almost all the sheets of paper on which it was written, starting with a paper napkin from the Methodist Cafeteria. If you had asked me where I had begun the poem I'd have said: "Why, Sir, at the beginning"; it was a surprise to me to see that I hadn't.

As I read, arranged, and remembered the pages it all came back to me. I went over them for several days, copying down most of the lines and phrases and mentioning some of the sights and circumstances they came out of; I tried to give a fairly good idea of the objective process of writing the poem. You may say, "But isn't a poem a kind of subjective process, like a dream? Doesn't it come out of unconscious wishes of yours, childhood memories, parts of your own private emotional life?" It certainly does: part of them I don't know about and the rest I didn't write about. Nor did I write about or copy down something that begins to appear on the last two or three pages: lines and phrases from a kind of counterpoem, named "Jerome," in which St. Jerome is a psychoanalyst and his lion is at the zoo.

If after reading this essay the reader should say: "You did all that you could to the things, but the things just came," he would feel about it as I do.

Late in the summer of 1956 my wife and I moved to Washington. We lived with two daughters, a cat, and a dog, in Chevy Chase; every day I

He left two hundred thousand pounds—and two
Old shoes, the less worn of his last two pairs;
One night-cap, two shirts, and three pairs of stockings;
And the coat in which he married Mary Welch.

Was "Mrs. White delivered of a sun"?
Who measured the dead Pitt? Ah, Nollekens,
To smuggle lace in busts! To leave poor Bronze
But twenty pounds! And yet, whoever dies?

"Ring a bell, ring a bell, my pretty little maid?—
Why, that I will." And I see straining for it
The crescent, tiptoe Nollekens. . . . "My heart,
To sit there in the dark, to save a candle—"
I grieve; but he says, looking steadfastly,
"If you laugh, I'll make a fool of ye."
And I nod, and think acquiescingly:
"Why, it is Nollekens the Sculptor."

Seele im Raum

It sat between my husband and my children.
A place was set for it—a plate of greens.
It had been there: I had seen it
But not somehow—but this was like a dream—
Not seen it so that I knew I saw it.
It was as if I could not know I saw it
Because I had never once in all my life
Not seen it. It was an eland.
An eland! *That* is why the children
Would ask my husband, for a joke, at Christmas:
"Father, is it Donner?" He would say, "No, Blitzten."
It had been there always. Now we put silver
At its place at meals, fed it the same food
We ourselves ate, and said nothing. Many times
When it breathed heavily (when it had tried
A long useless time to speak) and reached to me
So that I touched it—of a different size
And order of being, like the live hard side
Of a horse's neck when you pat the horse—
And looked with its great melting tearless eyes
Fringed with a few coarse wire-like lashes
Into my eyes, and whispered to me
So that my eyes turned backward in their sockets
And they said nothing—
many times
I have known, when they said nothing,
That it did not exist. If they had heard
They *could* not have been silent. And yet they heard;
Heard many times what I have spoken

When it could no longer speak, but only breathe—
When I could no longer speak, but only breathe.

And, after some years, the others came
And took it from me—it was ill, they told me—
And cured it, they wrote me: my whole city
Sent me cards like lilac-branches, mourning
As I had mourned—

and I was standing
By a grave in flowers, by dyed rolls of turf,
And a canvas marquee the last brown of earth.

It is over.

It is over so long that I begin to think
That it did not exist, that I have never—
And my son says, one morning, from the paper:
“An eland. Look, an eland!”

—It was so.

Today, in a German dictionary, I saw *eland*
And the heart in my breast turned over, it was—

It was a word one translates *wretched*.

It is as if someone remembered saying:
“This is an antimacassar that I grew from seed,”
And this were true.

And, truly,
One could not wish for anything more strange—
For anything more. And yet it wasn't *interesting* . . .
—It was worse than impossible, it was a joke.

And yet when it was, I *was*—
Even to think that I once thought
That I could see it is to feel the sweat
Like needles at my hair-roots, I am blind
—It was not even a joke, not even a joke.

2
Yet how can I believe it? Or believe that I
Owned it, a husband, children? Is my voice the voice
Of that skin of being—of what owns, is owned
In honor or dishonor, that is borne and bears—
Or of that raw thing, the being inside it
That has neither a wife, a husband, nor a child
But goes at last as naked from this world
As it was born into it—

And the eland comes and grazes on its grave.

This is senseless?
Shall I make sense or shall I tell the truth?
Choose either—I cannot do both.

I tell myself that. And yet it is not so,
And what I say afterwards will not be so:
To be at all is to be wrong.

Being is being old
And saying, almost comfortably, across a table
From—

from what I don't know—
in a voice
Rich with a kind of longing satisfaction:
“To own an eland! That's what I call life!”

DREAM-WORK

A Sick Child

The postman comes when I am still in bed.

"Postman, what do you have for me today?"

I say to him. (But really I'm in bed.)

Then he says—what shall I have him say?

"This letter says that you are president

Of—this word here; it's a republic."

Tell them I can't answer right away.

"It's your duty." No, I'd rather just be sick.

Then he tells me there are letters saying everything

That I can think of that I want for them to say.

I say, "Well, thank you very much. Good-bye."

He is ashamed, and turns and walks away.

[If I can think of it, it isn't what I want.

I want . . . I want a ship from some near star

To land in the yard, and beings to come out

And think to me: "So this is where you are!

Come." Except that they won't do,

I thought of them. . . . And yet somewhere there must be

Something that's different from everything.

All that I've never thought of—think of me!

Children Selecting Books in a Library

With beasts and gods, above, the wall is bright.
The child's head, bent to the book-colored shelves,
Is slow and sidelong and food-gathering,
Moving in blind grace . . . Yet from the mural, Care,
The grey-eyed one, fishing the morning mist,
Seizes the baby hero by the hair

And whispers, in the tongue of gods and children,
Words of a doom as ecumenical as dawn
But blanched, like dawn, with dew. The children's cries
Are to men the cries of crickets, dense with warmth
—But dip a finger into Fafnir, taste it,
And all their words are plain as chance and pain.

Their tales are full of sorcerers and ogres
Because their lives are: the capricious infinite
That, like parents, no one has yet escaped
Except by luck or magic; and since strength
And wit are useless, be kind or stupid, wait
Some power's gratitude, the tide of things.

Read meanwhile . . . hunt among the shelves, as dogs do, grasses,
And find one cure for Everychild's diseases
Beginning: *Once upon a time there was*
A wolf that fed, a mouse that warned, a bear that rode
A boy. Us men, alas! wolves, mice, bears bore.
And yet wolves, mice, bears, children, gods and men

In slow perambulation up and down the shelves
Of the universe are seeking . . . who knows except themselves?

4
What some escape to, some escape: if we find Swann's
Way better than our own, and trudge on at the back
Of the north wind to—somewhere east
Of the sun, west of the moon, it is because we live

By trading another's sorrow for our own; another's
Impossibilities, still unbelieving in, for our own . . .
“I am myself still”? For a little while, forget:
The world's selves cure that short disease, myself,
And we see bending to us, dewy-eyed, the great
CHANGE, dear to all things not to themselves endeared.

A Utopian Journey

"In a minute the doctor will find out what is wrong
And cure me," the patients think as they wait.
They are as patient as their name, and look childishly
And religiously at the circumstances of their hope,
The nurse, the diplomas, the old magazines.

And their childishness is natural; here in this office
The natural perplexities of their existence,
The demands they can neither satisfy nor understand,
Are reduced to the child's, "I hurt," the bare
Intention of any beast: to go on being.

And they go in to the doctor at last
And go out to the hospitals, sanatoria, or graves
He prescribes—look into the masked unnoticed
Faces of their saviors, smell the sick
Sweet smell of nothing, leave, send back their checks;

But what was it? What am I?
The convalescent stitched up with black thread,
His pains withering, his uneasy head
Quieted with enemas and orange-juice, the inconclusive
Evasive silence—remembers, silently, a sweet,

Evasive, and conclusive speech . . . Goes back to his living,
Day and Night ask, *Child, have you learned anything?*
He answers, *Nothing*—walled in these live ends,
In these blind blossoming alleys of the maze
That lead, through a thousand leaves, to the beginning
Or that lead at last into—dark, leaved—a door.

Hope

*The spirit killeth, but
the letter giveth life.*

The week is dealt out like a hand
That children pick up card by card.
One keeps getting the same hand.
One keeps getting the same card.

But twice a day—except on Saturday—
But every day—except on Sunday—
The wheel stops, there is a crack in Time:
With a hiss of soles, a rattle of tin,
My own gray Daemon pauses on the stair,
My own bald Fortune lifts me by the hair.

*Woe's me! woe's me! In Folly's mailbox
Still laughs the postcard, Hope:
Your uncle in Australia
Has died and you are Pope.
For many a soul has entertained
A Mailman unawares—
And as you cry, Impossible,
A step is on the stairs.*

One keeps getting the same dream
Delayed, marked *Postage Due*,
The bill that one has paid
Delayed, marked *Payment Due*—

Twice a day, in a rotting mailbox,
The white grubs are new:
And Faith, once more, is mine
Faithfully, but Charity
Writes hopefully about a new
Asylum—but Hope is as good as new.

*Woe's me! woe's me! In Folly's mailbox
Still laughs the postcard, Hope:
Your uncle in Australia
Has died and you are Pope.
For many a soul has entertained
A Mailman unawares—
And as you cry, Impossible,
A step is on the stairs.*

90 North

At home, in my flannel gown, like a bear to its floe,
I clambered to bed; up the globe's impossible sides
I sailed all night—till at last, with my black beard,
My furs and my dogs, I stood at the northern pole.

There in the childish night my companions lay frozen,
The stiff furs knocked at my starveling throat,
And I gave my great sigh: the flakes came huddling,
Were they really my end? In the darkness I turned to my rest.

—Here, the flag snaps in the glare and silence
Of the unbroken ice. I stand here,
The dogs bark, my beard is black, and I stare
At the North Pole . . .

And now what? Why, go back.

Turn as I please, my step is to the south.
The world—my world spins on this final point
Of cold and wretchedness: all lines, all winds
End in this whirlpool I at last discover.

And it is meaningless. In the child's bed
After the night's voyage, in that warm world
Where people work and suffer for the end
That crowns the pain—in that Cloud-Cuckoo-Land

I reached my North and it had meaning.
Here at the actual pole of my existence,
Where all that I have done is meaningless,
Where I die or live by accident alone—

Where, living or dying, I am still alone;
Here where North, the night, the berg of death
Crowd me out of the ignorant darkness,
I see at last that all the knowledge

I wrung from the darkness—that the darkness flung me—
Is worthless as ignorance: nothing comes from nothing,
The darkness from the darkness. Pain comes from the darkness
And we call it wisdom. It is pain.

The Snow-Leopard

His pads furring the scarp's rime,
Weightless in greys and ecru, gliding
Invisibly, incuriously
As the crystals of the cirri wandering
A mile below his absent eyes,
The leopard gazes at the caravan.
The yaks groaning with tea, the burlaps
Lapping and lapping each stunned universe
That gasps like a kettle for its thinning life
Are pools in the interminable abyss
That ranges up through ice, through air, to night.
Raiders of the unminding element,
The last cold capillaries of their kind,
They move so slowly they are motionless
To any eye less stubborn than a man's. . . .
From the implacable jumble of the blocks
The grains dance icily, a scouring plume,
Into the breath, sustaining, unsustainable,
They trade to that last stillness for their death.
They sense with misunderstanding horror, with desire,
Behind the world their blood sets up in mist
The brute and geometrical necessity:
The leopard waving with a grating purr
His six-foot tail; the leopard, who looks sleepily—
Cold, fugitive, secure—at all that he knows,
At all that he is: the heart of heartlessness.

Leghorns hunched on the roosts of their run.
The train mourned below
For the captives—a thinning echo. . . .
It all comes back to me now.

Jews at Haifa

The freighter, gay with rust,
Coasts to a bare wharf of the harbor.
From the funnel's shade (the arbor
Of gourds from which the prophet, without trust,
Watched his old enemies,
The beings of this earth) I scrutinize

The hundreds at the rail
Lapped in the blue blaze of this sea
Who stare till their looks fail
At the earth that they are promised; silently
See the sand-bagged machine-guns,
The red-kneed soldiers blinking in the sun.

A machine-gun away
Are men with our faces: we are torn
With the live blaze of day—
Till we feel shifting, wrenched apart, the worn
Named stones of our last knowledge:
That all men wish our death. Here on the edge

Of the graves of Europe
We believe: truly, we are not dead;
It seems to us that hope
Is possible—that even mercy is permitted
To men on this earth,
To Jews on this earth. . . . But at Cyprus, the red earth,

The huts, the trembling wire
That wreathes us, are to us familiar

As death. All night, the fires
Float their sparks up to the yellow stars;
From the steel, stilted tower
The light sweeps over us. We whisper: "Ours."

Ours; and the stones slide home.
There is no hope; "in all this world
There is no other wisdom
Than ours: we have understood the world,"
We think; but hope, in dread
Search for one doubt, and whisper: "Truly, we are not dead."

Prisoners

Within the wires of the post, unloading the cans of garbage,
The three in soiled blue denim (the white *P* on their backs
Sending its chilly *North* six yards to the turning blackened
Sights of the cradled rifle, to the eyes of the yawning guard)
Go on all day being punished, go on all month, all year
Loading, unloading; give their child's, beast's sigh—of despair,
Of endurance and of existence; look unexpectedly
At the big guard, dark in his khaki, at the dust of the blazing plain,
At the running or crawling soldiers in their soiled and shapeless green.

The prisoners, the guards, the soldiers—they are all, in their way,
being trained.
From these moments, repeated forever, our own new world will be
made.

The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Losses

It was not dying: everybody died.
It was not dying: we had died before
In the routine crashes—and our fields
Called up the papers, wrote home to our folks,
And the rates rose, all because of us.
We died on the wrong page of the almanac,
Scattered on mountains fifty miles away;
Diving on haystacks, fighting with a friend,
We blazed up on the lines we never saw.
We died like aunts or pets or foreigners.
(When we left high school nothing else had died
For us to figure we had died like.)

In our new planes, with our new crews, we bombed
The ranges by the desert or the shore,
Fired at towed targets, waited for our scores—
And turned into replacements and woke up
One morning, over England, operational.
It wasn't different; but if we died
It was not an accident but a mistake
(But an easy one for anyone to make).
We read our mail and counted up our missions—
In bombers named for girls, we burned
The cities we had learned about in school—
Till our lives wore out; our bodies lay among
The people we had killed and never seen.
When we lasted long enough they gave us medals;
When we died they said, "Our casualties were low."

To Mary

The Woman at the Washington Zoo

The saris go by me from the embassies.

Cloth from the moon. Cloth from another planet.
They look back at the leopard like the leopard.

And I. . . .

 this print of mine, that has kept its color
Alive through so many cleanings; this dull null
Navy I wear to work, and wear from work, and so
To my bed, so to my grave, with no
Complaints, no comment: neither from my chief,
The Deputy Chief Assistant, nor his chief—
Only I complain. . . . this serviceable
Body that no sunlight dyes, no hand suffuses
But, dome-shadowed, withering among columns,
Wavy beneath fountains—small, far-off, shining
In the eyes of animals, these beings trapped
As I am trapped but not, themselves, the trap,
Aging, but without knowledge of their age,
Kept safe here, knowing not of death, for death—
Oh, bars of my own body, open, open!

The world goes by my cage and never sees me.
And there come not to me, as come to these,
The wild beasts, sparrows pecking the llamas' grain,
Pigeons settling on the bears' bread, buzzards
Tearing the meat the flies have clouded. . . .

 Vulture,
When you come for the white rat that the foxes left,

Take off the red helmet of your head, the black
Wings that have shadowed me, and step to me as man:
The wild brother at whose feet the white wolves fawn,
To whose hand of power the great lioness
Stalks, purring. . . .

You know what I was,
You see what I am: change me, change me!

Cinderella

Her imaginary playmate was a grown-up
In sea-coal satin. The flame-blue glances,
The wings gauzy as the membrane that the ashes
Draw over an old ember—as the mother
In a jug of cider—were a comfort to her.
They sat by the fire and told each other stories.

“What men want. . . .” said the godmother softly—
How she went on it is hard for a man to say.
Their eyes, on their Father, were monumental marble.
Then they smiled like two old women, bussed each other,
Said, “Gossip, gossip”; and, lapped in each other’s looks,
Mirror for mirror, drank a cup of tea.

Of cambric tea. But there is a reality
Under the good silk of the good sisters’
Good ball gowns. *She* knew. . . . Hard-breasted, naked-eyed,
She pushed her silk feet into glass, and rose within
A gown of imaginary gauze. The shy prince drank
A toast to her in champagne from her slipper

And breathed, “Bewitching!” Breathed, “I am bewitched!”
—She said to her godmother, “Men!”
And, later, looking down to see her flesh
Look back up from under lace, the ashy gauze
And pulsing marble of a bridal veil,
She wished it all a widow’s coal-black weeds.

A sullen wife and a reluctant mother,
She sat all day in silence by the fire.

The chance of life. Now the boy pats my dog
And we start home. Now I am good.

The last mistaken,
Ecstatic, accidental bliss, the blind

Happiness that, bursting, leaves upon the palm
Some soap and water—

It was so long ago, back in some Gay
Twenties, Nineties, I don't know . . . Today I miss
My lovely daughter

Away at school, my sons away at school,

My husband away at work—I wish for them.

The dog, the maid,
And I go through the sure unvarying days
At home in them. As I look at my life,

I am afraid

Only that it will change, as I am changing:

I am afraid, this morning, of my face.

It looks at me

From the rear-view mirror, with the eyes I hate,

The smile I hate. Its plain, lined look

Of gray discovery

Repeats to me: "You're old." That's all, I'm old.

And yet I'm afraid, as I was at the funeral
I went to yesterday.

My friend's cold made-up face, granite among its flowers,
Her undressed, operated-on, dressed body
Were my face and body.

As I think of her I hear her telling me

How young I seem; I *am* exceptional;
I think of all I have.

But really no one is exceptional,
No one has anything, I'm anybody,
I stand beside my grave

Confused with my life, that is commonplace and solitary.

The Mockingbird

Look one way and the sun is going down,
Look the other and the moon is rising.

The sparrow's shadow's longer than the lawn.

The bats squeak: "Night is here"; the birds cheep: "Day is gone."

On the willow's highest branch, monopolizing

Day and night, cheeping, squeaking, soaring,

The mockingbird is imitating life.

All day the mockingbird has owned the yard.

As light first woke the world, the sparrows trooped

Onto the seedy lawn: the mockingbird

Chased them off shrieking. Hour by hour, fighting hard

To make the world his own, he swooped

On thrushes, thrashers, jays, and chickadees—

At noon he drove away a big black cat.

Now, in the moonlight, he sits here and sings.

A thrush is singing, then a thrasher, then a jay—

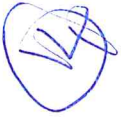
Then, all at once, a cat begins meowing.

A mockingbird can sound like anything.

He imitates the world he drove away

So well that for a minute, in the moonlight,

Which one's the mockingbird? which one's the world?



LIVES

A Girl in a Library

An object among dreams, you sit here with your shoes off
And curl your legs up under you; your eyes
Close for a moment, your face moves toward sleep . . .
You are very human.

But my mind, gone out in tenderness,
Shrinks from its object with a thoughtful sigh.
This is a waist the spirit breaks its arm on.
The gods themselves, against you, struggle in vain.
This broad low strong-boned brow; these heavy eyes;
These calves, grown muscular with certainties;
This nose, three medium-sized pink strawberries
—But I exaggerate. In a little you will leave:
I'll hear, half squeal, half shriek, your laugh of greeting—
Then, *decrecendo*, bars of that strange speech
In which each sound sets out to seek each other,
Murders its own father, marries its own mother,
And ends as one grand transcendental vowel.

(Yet for all I know, the Egyptian Helen spoke so.)
As I look, the world contracts around you:
I see Brünnhilde had brown braids and glasses
She used for studying; Salome straight brown bangs,

A calf's brown eyes, and sturdy light-brown limbs
 Dusted with cinnamon, an apple-dumpling's . . .
 Many a beast has gnawn a leg off and got free,
 Many a dolphin curved up from Necessity—
 The trap has closed about you, and you sleep.
 If someone questioned you, *What doest thou here?*
 You'd knit your brows like an orangoutang
 (But not so sadly; not so thoughtfully)
 And answer with a pure heart, guilelessly:
I'm studying. . . .

If only you were not!

Assignments,
 recipes,
 the *Official Rulebook*

Of Basketball—ah, let them go; you needn't mind.
 The soul has no assignments, neither cooks
 Nor referees: it wastes its time.

It wastes its time.

Here in this enclave there are centuries
 For you to waste: the short and narrow stream
 Of Life meanders into a thousand valleys
 Of all that was, or might have been, or is to be.
 The books, just leafed through, whisper endlessly . . .
 Yet it is hard. One sees in your blurred eyes
 The "uneasy half-soul" Kipling saw in dogs'.
 One sees it, in the glass, in one's own eyes.
 In rooms alone, in galleries, in libraries,
 In tears, in searchings of the heart, in staggering joys
 We memorize once more our old creation,
 Humanity: with what yawns the unwilling
 Flesh puts on its spirit, O my sister!

So many dreams! And not one troubles
 Your sleep of life? no self stares shadowily
 From these worn hexahedrons, beckoning
 With false smiles, tears? . . .

Meanwhile Tatyana
 Larina (gray eyes nickel with the moonlight
 That falls through the willows onto Lensky's tomb;
 Now young and shy, now old and cold and sure)
 Asks, smiling: "But what is she dreaming of, fat thing?"
 I answer: She's not fat. She isn't dreaming.
 She purrs or laps or runs, all in her sleep;
 Believes, awake, that she is beautiful;
 She never dreams.

Those sunrise-colored clouds
 Around man's head—that inconceivable enchantment
 From which, at sunset, we come back to life
 To find our graves dug, families dead, selves dying:
 Of all this, Tanya, she is innocent.
 For nineteen years she's faced reality:
 They look alike already.

They say, man wouldn't be
 The best thing in this world—and isn't he?—
 If he were not too good for it. But she
 —She's good enough for it.

And yet sometimes
 Her sturdy form, in its pink strapless formal,
 Is as if bathed in moonlight—modulated
 Into a form of joy, a Lydian mode;
 This Wooden Mean's a kind, furred animal
 That speaks, in the Wild of things, delighting riddles
 To the soul that listens, trusting . . .

Poor senseless Life:
 When, in the last light sleep of dawn, the messenger
 Comes with his message, you will not awake.
 He'll give his feathery whistle, shake you hard,
 You'll look with wide eyes at the dewy yard
 And dream, with calm slow factuality:
 "Today's Commencement. My bachelor's degree
 In Home Ec., my doctorate of philosophy
 In Phys. Ed.

[Tanya, they won't even scan]

Are waiting for me. . . ."

Oh, Tatyana,

The Angel comes: better to squawk like a chicken
Than to say with truth, "But I'm a *good* girl,"
And Meet his Challenge with a last firm strange
Uncomprehending smile; and—then, then!—see
The blind date that has stood you up: your life.

(For all this, if it isn't, perhaps, life,
Has yet, at least, a language of its own
Different from the books'; worse than the books'.)
And yet, the ways we miss our lives are life.

Yet . . . yet . . .
to have one's life add up to *yet*!

You sigh a shuddering sigh. Tatyana murmurs,
"Don't cry, little peasant"; leaves us with a swift
"Good-bye, good-bye . . . Ah, don't think ill of me . . ."
Your eyes open: you sit here thoughtlessly.

I love you—and yet—and yet—I love you.

Don't cry, little peasant. Sit and dream.
One comes, a finger's width beneath your skin,
To the braided maidens singing as they spin;
There sound the shepherd's pipe, the watchman's rattle
Across the short dark distance of the years.
I am a thought of yours: and yet, you do not think . . .
The firelight of a long, blind, dreaming story
Lingers upon your lips; and I have seen
Firm, fixed forever in your closing eyes,
The Corn King beckoning to his Spring Queen.

A Country Life

A bird that I don't know,
Hunched on his light-pole like a scarecrow,
Looks sideways out into the wheat
The wind waves under the waves of heat.
The field is yellow as egg-bread dough
Except where (just as though they'd let
It live for looks) a locust billows
In leaf-green and shade-violet,
A standing mercy.
The bird calls twice, "*Red clay, red clay*";
Or else he's saying, "Directly, directly."
If someone came by I could ask,
Around here all of them must know—
And why they live so and die so—
Or why, for once, the lagging heron
Flaps from the little creek's parched cresses
Across the harsh-grassed, gullied meadow
To the black, rowed evergreens below.

They know and they don't know.
To ask, a man must be a stranger—
And asking, much more answering, is dangerous;
Asked about it, who would not repent
Of all he ever did and never meant,
And think a life and its distresses,
Its random, clutched-for, homefelt blisses,
The circumstances of an accident?
The farthest farmer in a field,
A gaunt plant grown, for seed, by farmers,

Well Water

What a girl called "the dailiness of life"
(Adding an errand to your errand. Saying,
"Since you're up . . ." Making you a means to
A means to a means to) is well water
Pumped from an old well at the bottom of the world.
The pump you pump the water from is rusty
And hard to move and absurd, a squirrel-wheel
A sick squirrel turns slowly, through the sunny
Inexorable hours. And yet sometimes
The wheel turns of its own weight, the rusty
Pump pumps over your sweating face the clear
Water, cold, so cold! you cup your hands
And gulp from them the dailiness of life.

The Lost Children

Two little girls, one fair, one dark,
One alive, one dead, are running hand in hand
Through a sunny house. The two are dressed
In red and white gingham, with puffed sleeves and sashes.
They run away from me . . . But I am happy;
When I wake I feel no sadness, only delight.
I've seen them again, and I am comforted
That, somewhere, they still are.

It is strange
To carry inside you someone else's body;
To know it before it's born;
To see at last that it's a boy or girl, and perfect;
To bathe it and dress it; to watch it
Nurse at your breast, till you almost know it
Better than you know yourself—better than it knows itself.
You own it as you made it.
You are the authority upon it.

But as the child learns
To take care of herself, you know her less.
Her accidents, adventures are her own,
You lose track of them. Still, you know more
About her than anyone *except* her.

Little by little the child in her dies.
You say, "I have lost a child, but gained a friend."
You feel yourself gradually discarded.
She argues with you or ignores you