

Adam Phillips – The Poet's Essay

Seminar 3: 'On Teaching Poetry'

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on teaching poetry

Note: This essay was written as a lecture to inaugurate an annual series of endowed lectures at Berkeley on the subject of teaching poetry. The series was established by the family of Judith Lee Stronach to honor her memory. Judith was my friend, an activist on behalf of human rights, nonviolence, women's issues, and poetry, which she had begun to write in the middle of her life. The lecture was delivered on an evening in early May. Judith had killed herself the previous fall.

Well, it is an honor to inaugurate this lecture series on the teaching of poetry, established to honor the memory of Judith Lee Stronach, and to be here among Judith Stronach's friends and colleagues, among my colleagues and friends and some of my students.

It's an honor and it's also a bit daunting to think about how to think about the subject of the teaching of poetry on this occasion and in this context.

Most of you know about—many of you have experienced firsthand—Judith Stronach's extraordinary generosity and the fierceness and steadiness and persistence of her commitment to others and to the life of the community, especially perhaps her work with Amnesty International and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, and its magazine, *Turning Wheel*, the subtitle of which is *The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism* and for which she wrote articles, and then a column, on subjects ranging from a meditation class in a women's prison to political torture.

And you probably know something of the depth of Judith's commitment to poetry and to the possibility of poetry in many kinds of lives. The Stronach Prize, a gift of money and praise and encouragement aimed specifically at returning students, was one of her ideas. At *Turning Wheel* Judith also funded the Young Writer's Award. In the

early 1990s, she edited *Visible and Invisible*, a book of poems and stories by the homeless of Berkeley. She was on the board and a crucial supporter of River of Words, the environmental education project here in Berkeley that encourages children all over the country to learn about watershed stewardship and to find ways of expressing their experience of their environments in poetry and art. More to the point, Judith taught poetry herself in enough different venues to make clear what I meant by steadiness and fierceness and persistence. She taught poetry at the Women's Shelter in Berkeley, at the juvenile hall for girls in Contra Costa County, in the I Have a Dream program at Prescott Elementary School in Oakland, for three or four years as a volunteer poet in the school at Martin Luther King Middle School in Berkeley, and in the months before her death at Willard Middle School in Berkeley.

As a writer Judith came to poetry late—or felt that she had—and I think that was one of the reasons why she established the Stronach Prize, to give encouragement to others like herself who were perhaps rediscovering or a little belatedly discovering the force of the written word in their lives. I came to know Judith in the late eighties and early nineties when I began teaching at Cal and found myself for the first time in many years giving large lecture courses on poetry. Judith took to auditing my classes. She did so, I supposed then, for what I could give her in the way of information about the art of poetry, since I had been thinking about it in one way or another most of my adult life and she felt that she was catching up. But whatever her reasons, it was a pleasure for me to have an observer in the room, somewhere near my age, while I was trying out what was to some extent a new *métier*. And Judith, with her sure sense of style and her sense of humor, of the droll and the contradictory, was, in her way, very generous about it and very frank, quite free with praise and also with practical criticism and with argument. It was a very lucky thing for me. And it was what I thought of when I was asked to give this talk.

The next thing I thought of was more complicated. And that is the fact that Judith with her passionate love of poetry and her missionary zeal to bring it into the lives of others had taken her own life.

"What is poetry," Czeslaw Milosz wrote in his great poem "Dedication," composed in the wake of the terrible violence that the Second World War visited on Warsaw, "if it does not save people or nations?" Whatever poetry was to her—at least this thought crossed my mind—it did not save her.

Of course, one has no way of knowing. People who knew Judith only somewhat, as I did, understood that she struggled with depression. Most of us had no idea of the depth and intensity of that struggle and cannot know how long her love of poetry and her spiritual practice and her social activism and the deep gift of love in her life buoyed her up, kept her from being overwhelmed by whatever it was, the tide of suffering or injury or despair or self-violence that took her from us.

So this lecture series, the idea of honoring her memory in this place that she loved, for years to come, with a series of reflections on what we do when we teach poetry, what it does, how it is done, what gifts it confers, seemed to me a brilliant idea, a lovely idea, and a very fitting way to honor her memory, and also, to say the whole truth—and since it's poetry we're talking about, we're bound to wander as near the truth as possible—a slightly terrible one: a riddle about the nature of what we do, we writers and critics who profess literature, and what the limits are, and—for readers of poetry or gazers at paintings or films, listeners to music, for all of us who have found there comfort and consolation and instruction, unnervings, adumbrations of meaning, echoes of intuitions we hadn't even understood that we had—a riddle about where we go and what self or world we find in the vivid interiors of works of art.

One way for me to begin to think about that riddle was to wonder what Judith herself had said about what poetry meant to her—that is, the writing of poetry—and I looked to the beginning of her small book *Two Summers*. It was written in a time of trauma and of healing, after her mother died, and it is made of two sets of poems, one located in summer in the Hamptons and the other in Italy; it is a time of domestic peace and reflection, of the rich and not always easy healing inside a marriage after the trauma of a loss. "I was trying in my poetry to understand and get close to my experience," she writes at one point, "and then to find a language for it."

Not much information, but enough and of exactly the right kind to help us imagine in the voice of those poems someone who was coming into language and beginning to sink into it as a way of—I say "voice" but I really mean something more like the "sensation" of the poem, something conveyed unspoken in the speaking of the poems—emerging from shock. Emily Dickinson's line comes to mind: "After great pain, a formal feeling comes." That unforgettable line: you feel

it all through these poems of Judith's, especially in the beginning of her sequence.

She writes that she did not like these first poems so well. She felt they were too abstract and thought-bound. The poems written in Italy seemed more filled with what she called "the sensual reality of this sun-drenched life" and there was an emotional resonance in the poems of that second summer that seemed to her an advance.

That is what the prose tells us of her thoughts. But, with the poems, it is enough to give us a glimpse of what the practice of poetry was for her, a centering, a way of being clear-eyed, of discovering feeling in verbal rhythm, and—this is surely the paradox of poetry—of understanding and getting close to her experience. A paradox because it could as well be argued that language is not what gets us close to experience but what mediates between us and experience. Eating a peach, after all, is not the same thing as a description, however vivid, of eating a peach.

So the third thing I thought about, thinking about this lecture, was what I thought I was doing when I taught poetry in those days when Judith was listening to me and writing little note-critiques of my lectures. The phrase that came into my head by way of first handhold on the question was the title of a book of essays by W. H. Auden, a phrase that he borrowed from Shakespeare, *The Dyer's Hand*. In Shakespeare, I think, the phrase is connected to ideas of blood-guilt; in Auden it is connected to a notion of someone so immersed in their trade that they are permanently colored by it.

When I began teaching poetry, one of my doubts about my ability to do it had to do with the fact that I was never not interested in it, and so I didn't know how to put myself in the place of people who were bored or intimidated by it. My inclination, therefore, was not to go to the students and bring them along from my imagination of some place of trepidation or suspicion, but to assume their interest, and at Berkeley for the most part that's been a reasonable assumption.

In talking about this with Judith, I was able to quote a haiku that I love by the nineteenth-century poet Kobayashi Issa, which goes like this—seventeen syllables in the Japanese:

The man pulling radishes
Pointed my way
With a radish.

Can you imagine the situation? The narrator of the poem is hiking along a road. He stops and asks for directions. And the fellow working in the field waves his radish—it's a daikon, one of those long skinny Japanese radishes—and says, "Oh, it's about four miles down the road on the left." That's my image of myself teaching poetry: I was the guy with the radish.

One of the pleasures of this poem is that it is written from the point of view of the traveler. And it is in the past tense. So, saying the poem, we are in the mind of the traveler after he has received directions from the farmer. One imagines a slight smile on his face as he records to himself his own observation of the farmer's small, revelatory gesture. It is the smile the poem gives us. And, as readers, we are in a position to notice that the traveler is doing what travelers do, noticing and telling afterward. It is, famously, one of the reasons for travel: to be given the fresh pair of eyes that an uprooting from our normal routines gives us. That is, the traveler in the poem is behaving exactly like a traveler in the same way that the farmer is behaving exactly like a farmer. Everyone, the poem observes, is subsumed to his element, and the metaphorical contexts of this observation are rootedness and uprootedness and also the seeking out of direction.

So it turns out to be a poem useful for thinking about the teaching of poetry in several ways. Because if I, teaching poetry, am the man pulling radishes, the students are the travelers asking for direction. And they are not just asking for direction, as students electing to receive an education are doing; they are also getting educated by their observation of the process. It is a useful thing for a teacher to remember, especially a university lecturer, that the students are learning not just from the content of your teaching, but from the privileges that go with the observer standpoint. They get to watch you with detachment, perhaps with amusement. They can listen with sympathy and without. One hopes that they are as alert as Issa, or that Issa's poem can instruct them in such alertness. Sometimes they would be inside the poems, learning what the poems have to teach, and sometimes they would be outside the poems, watching this person waving his dyer's or radish-puller's hand and giving them what he took to be directions.

It was therefore my plan, since it was my inclination, not to lecture much about the aims of poetry or the value of poetry or the nature of poetry, but to talk about poems, because, the truth is, I am much more

interested in poems than in the nature of poetry in more or less the same way that someone might be more interested in eating than the theory of cuisine.

Having said all this, I should add that, beginning to teach, I came to realize that I had forgotten my own experience. It's true that I was always interested in poetry, but it's not true that I was never intimidated by it. I had, in high school and college, skulked around the edges of what I understood to be the great modernist masterworks by Pound and Eliot and Williams and Stevens and Moore and others—feeling their importance, catching flickers of whatever it was that poetry held and that I desired—in some of the bits of them that I could make out, and wishing to be, though in a somewhat defiant way and with somewhat mixed feelings, the sort of person who could understand them.

I'm not sure what name to put to what I wanted. "Life" occurs to me, that they had more life in them than seemed available to me; for example, the poem by Ezra Pound, called "Alba," that goes:

As cool as the pale, wet leaves
Of lily-of-the-valley,
She lay beside me in the dawn

I loved that poem, I'm pretty sure, because no one had as yet lain beside me, warm or cool, in the dawn. If that was what poetry was about, I was definitely ready to sign up.

"Wisdom" also occurs to me, as the name of the thing I was hungry for. I remember an experience of standing in the library in my freshmen year of college and picking up T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* and reading in it and feeling complete incomprehension and a desire to be able to comprehend it or to find someone who could explain it to me, open it up for me, so intense it felt like physical nausea. Even though I didn't know what it was that I thought was in that poem. Not so much "life," perhaps, but knowledge of it and its great mysteries, love and sex and death and the amorphous and puzzling self and the meanings of suffering and injustice and the nature of things. Drawn to poetry by these strong but somewhat undefinable impulses, also perhaps by the fact that putting words down on paper and composing phrases in my mind seemed like something I could actually do, I came to the writing of poetry and the reading of poetry at more or less the same time, and I took to it, entered its terri-

tory more or less poem by poem, as this or that poem—lifeless words on a page—came alive for me. So it was very much my impulse in the teaching of poetry to pass on to my students in the classroom that experience, and so teaching poetry for me has been mostly about reflecting on what makes particular poems come alive to me and trying to convey that experience to others.

Sometimes the simplest way to bring a poem alive is to utter it. One way of thinking about what's special about poetry as an art that has lately occurred to me is that it's a kind of speech that's meant to be said by others. In most of our speaking—for example, "I need a job" or "I'll take the roast chicken with summer vegetables" or "You can have the car, but you have to be home by eleven thirty," we have no expectation that we are forming the utterance so that someone else will speak it. There are kinds of utterance and forms of writing that are designed to be easily remembered and repeated—"Waste not, want not," "I before e, except after c, or when sounded as a, as in *neighbor* and *sleigh*," "Reeds are round, sedges have edges"—but it is not necessarily part of their design that they be uttered. They don't enact the drama of their being spoken. It is the particular quality of song lyric, and poetry, and prayer, that they're said and imagined to be said. More than that, they're imagined to be said by almost any speaker and that speaker is expected to assume, to put on, the experience that the poem conveys.

So the aliveness of poetry begins with this primary act of identification and it enters our bodies that way, through its rhythmic character. We take in, put on, the physical breath of the spoken utterance. The example of this fact that I like to give to my students comes from a poem I fell in love with in high school, John Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." The narrator of that poem comes across a knight who is "alone and palely loitering" around a withered lake. The narrator asks him what his ailment is, and the knight tells the story of a beautiful woman, or some kind of female creature, who took him into her cave and made love to him and abandoned him before he woke in the morning; and he, the knight, can't leave the place because she might come back again. The poem is the still-adolescent Keats's metaphor for being consumed and paralyzed by ideal beauty.

Its great moment is its description of the wild creature's seduction of the young knight. It was the sexiness of the sound of it that caught my attention in an interminable, early afternoon English class in the springtime. The knight is describing how the woman came on to him:

She looked at me, as she did love,
And made sweet moan.

Say it aloud. "And made sweet moan." Enough to get the attention of any young man watching dust motes fall through sunlight in a classroom. Say it again. "And made sweet moan." What you will notice, if you articulate just the sequence of vowels sounds—anhhh, aayyy, eeeee, ooooh—is that they begin in the far back of the throat, move to the mid-back, to the mouth, and then breathe out through the lips, in a perfectly modulated release of breath. That's one of the first things poetry is: a physical structure of the actual breath of a given emotion.

And so the first thing for me about teaching poetry has been putting that breath into people's bodies—either by having them say the poem aloud, or saying it to them, or having someone else in the class say it to them. Shall we visit Keats's line once more?

Say it again. "And made sweet moan." I've come to think that the physical sensation—even if we read it silently, the mental equivalent of the physical sensation—of the rhythms of a poem get planted in us far more deeply than any ideas we may come to have about its meaning and that, trying to bring poetry alive, we need to attend to them.

Another way: sometimes a bit of information is all it takes to bring a poem into view. Take this little scrap of a song from one of Shakespeare's plays:

Golden lads and lasses must
Like chimney sweepers turn to dust.

As a truism, set to a sweet lilt, this is a pleasing piece of writing. But to get the richness of it and to get something about the way Shakespeare's verbal imagination works, a modern reader needs a piece of information that was immediately available to an Elizabethan audience and has been lost to us. "Golden lad" was, in the 1590s, a term for *dandelion*, and the word for the dried dandelion with its nimbus of seeds that children like to blow into the air was *chimney sweep*. The folk metaphor adds another, magical—rueful, sweet, terrible, tonally complicated—layer to the poem.

One can stand back at that point and notice the way the language works—the roundness of the word *golden* and the liquid of "golden lads

and lasses," and the difference between those sounds and the sounds of the *ch* and *sw* in *chimney sweep*.

Or speak about symmetry and asymmetry in poems. For example, in the small rhythms of these lines, the poem begins on the beat—"Gold"—just as most rock and roll lyrics do: "We all live in a yellow submarine"; and the second line—"like chim"—begins off the beat, like a 1940s torch song: "Night and day, you are the one." It's the nearest you can come to doing a major and then a minor in the sheer rhythms of verse. That's one thing. Another is that the couplets lock the two together, which deepens the fusing, natural to metaphor, of the cycle of flowering weeds and of human life. And that rhyme, of course, "dust," "must," fuses the ideas of necessity and death.

One could talk about symmetry, asymmetry, inevitability, and surprise, and probably at that point it would be at least interesting to talk about social class and asymmetry. Another piece of information useful to students here (if they haven't read *Oliver Twist*) is the fact that chimney sweeps were typically children—young boys, children of the poor, sold into apprenticeships—and this should in turn remind us of all the contexts of *golden*, that it conjures not only the sun and high summer, but the luminosity conveyed by money. For us, latecomers to these lines, with a different, more fluid relation to social class, "golden lads and lasses" is likely to suggest any version of that golden blessedness when you are young and can feel that everything is there for you—all that's going to blow away.

So, in this case, teaching poetry is a matter of providing some information that makes the entire verbal texture of a poem more present and then calling attention to that texture, to the depth and swiftness and complexity of it when it's doing the work of poetry.

Another easy example is a haiku by the eighteenth-century Japanese poet Buson. It is a poem that didn't mean much to me the first time I came across it in translation. It goes like this:

Pear blossoms,
And a woman in moonlight
Reading a letter.

Seventeen syllables in Japanese. What commentaries will tell you is that the seasonal references in haiku are intensely specific in Japanese poetry. Plum blossoms, as in Berkeley, mean mid-February. It's the blos-

som of the icy-sharp early spring. Cherry blossoms are late April and early May, high spring, and they have in Japan a rich range of accumulated symbolic meanings. Cherry trees were cultivated around palaces and in temple gardens. Pear blossoms are late; they're associated with the fullness of late spring and its warmth, going into summer, when the air seems to soften, so they have a kind of mellow association and are often connected to ideas of romantic love.

So the blossoms in this poem are white pear blossoms. Another fact that matters to the poem is that women of the court in the eighteenth century made up their faces quite heavily with white powder. Still another fact that's important is that Buson was, as well as a poet, one of the most important painters of his age, and one who was particularly fascinated with color. As soon as you know that, you know that the poem is a study in white. It's late spring, early summer. The air is sweet. There are white blossoms in the moonlight and under them a woman is reading a letter by moonlight. The paper is also white, like her face. And it's a private letter because she's gone outside in the dark to be by herself to read it. It's a love letter of some kind. And the moon in the sky is solitary and bright. So this is a study in white that is about desire and about the intensity of it figured as the first summery nights in late spring. The woman, in her isolation, could be a figure in a Hopper painting, but the aesthetic insistence of all the shades of white suggest Whistler's *The White Girl*. Three or four facts to call up the traditions available to a Japanese person reading the poem, and it is alive in front of us.

Another example of the way information can help involves Blake's great poem "London." Let me read it to you. It doesn't necessarily need anybody to bring it to life, so fierce it is, probably the greatest political poem in the English language, written at the time of the French Revolution, when rage was causing people to re-see the disparities of social class that were, in Shakespeare, almost facts of nature.

I wander thro' each charter'd street
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every infan't's cry of fear,

In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forged manacles I hear:

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,
And blights with plagues the marriage-hearse.

There is much for an attentive person to sort out in the poem, after having been taken by the hammer strokes of the rhythm. Though, when I first read it, I didn't understand how the images were connected, there was something about the clarity of the images, line by line, and the force of the rhythm and the fall of the rhymes that was thrilling. Later, studying the poem, the thing that interested me most was discovering a crucial revision that Blake made that altered his first writing of it. The first stanza in an earlier draft went like this:

I wander thro' each dirty street,
Near where the dirty Thames does flow,
Mark in every face I meet
The marks of woe.

Charter'd was a second thought, and *charter'd* had two meanings; one referred to the Magna Carta and the chartered rights of all free-born Englishmen, and the other referred to the charter of the city of London. In making the revision, he turned a protest against cruelty and squalor into a protest against an intentional human order—made by people, on purpose—that gives special force to the phrase "mind-forged manacles." Our first unfreedom, this line says, is the unfreedom in our own heads. From it springs a social order that allows us to live daily, obliviously, with the monstrous cruelty of the inequities of the distribution of social goods in the world.

Another example of the way in which information about revision,

even of a small detail, can bring a poem alive is one of the last poems written by Wallace Stevens before his death in 1955. He was, as you know, a vice president of the Hartford Insurance Company and he brooded over the nature of reality and the imagination's quest to define it in the weathers of New England. Like many New Englanders, he vacationed in Florida, whose palm trees symbolized for him some sensuous fullness of life that was only semiavailable to his Puritan temperament. So, just before his death, he could write a poem like this. It's called "Of Mere Being":

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze décor.

A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.

The palm stands at the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

One of the things I'm able to tell students about this poem is that when Stevens first wrote it, he wrote

The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze distance.

And then he changed "distance" to "décor." It's as if he had, in one stroke, made the philosophical leap from Romanticism to postmodernism, from the idea of the meaning of the world as attainable but just out of reach to the idea of the world as a stage set, a set of fictions.

In a delicious book of interviews with people who knew Stevens—

including one with his chauffeur—I found out that one of his favorite songs was "It's Only a Paper Moon." You know the lyric:

It's only a paper moon,
Hanging over a cardboard sea,
But it wouldn't be make-believe
If you believed in me.

And about the time that I made this discovery, I heard one of the very elderly authors of that song—Yip Harburg, born in New York—one of the last great songwriters of the generation that wore Hawaiian shirts and smoked cigars and went to the track—being interviewed on the radio. The interviewer asked him if the songs he had written many years before still meant much to him, and he described himself going into the room where his wife of however many years was sleeping and serenading her with "It's Only a Paper Moon," and he sang it on the radio. This was about ten years ago. I think he is now long dead. But he sang "It's Only a Paper Moon" for Terry Gross in a growly, gravelly voice with a young man's lightness, and he sang the phrase "Without your love, it's a honky-tonk parade," as if *honky-tonk* were the most raffish and up-to-date slang. "Without your love it's a melody played in a penny arcade." One would have to explain to students that a penny arcade was an antique version of a video arcade. Does everyone know the words?

It's a Barnum and Bailey world,
Just as phony as it can be,
But it wouldn't be make-believe
If you believe in me.

I could say to students: if you substitute *imagination* for *love*, you have in hand one of Wallace Stevens's persistent thoughts about the world, and our experience of it, and the nature of knowledge. *Bronze* then becomes a word to think about, the bronzes of autumnal New England and the sun-gilded bronzes of the tropics. We live, the poem muses, in a bronze décor. And it contains a sort of final palm tree, and a horizon, because in the imagination, which is really no space and no time, there are nevertheless horizons. So one could say that postmodernism has not so much superseded Romanticism in this poem

as swallowed it. Probably that bird in the palm with its fire-fangled feathers is the sun seen through palm leaves. It could be the sun coming up or the sun going down; you can't tell. In the imagination it could be both, and the fact that this was one of his last poems gives this ambiguity another resonance. To notice all this is to put someone's state of mind—or someone's construction of the fiction of a state of mind, that of a man who's worked at poetry his entire life, haunted by the mystery of whether language can get hold of existence at all—to put that poem, its breath, its second thoughts, its strange metaphor, into other people's possession. Something like this is surely the gift poetry gives us and that, teaching poetry, we give to others.

I want to share one more example with you to complete this impromptu anthology.

It's a passage from a poem of Judith's, which I was reading the other day that suggests one more way of thinking about how one might try to transmit to others what is most difficult to convey about the experience of poetry. Having picked up *Two Summers* to look at what Judith had had to say about what poetry was for her, I found myself rereading the poems. I was, at the same moment, teaching T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, those poems that had been so mysterious to me when I was an adolescent. I have come to understand them a little, to love the poems in certain parts and hate them in others. Students still find them quite fascinating, moved by, among other things, I think, as I was, a sense of their gravity and depth, and I always sense the intensity of their—*interest* is not quite the right word; the right word would split the difference between *curiosity* and *desire*, if the object of desire was unformulated. So, in that case, one wants to give students the poem, to give them one's own access to the poem and also to stay out of their way, to not overformulate the poems in a way that would give them the impression that the poems were a closed book, fully understood, settled in some way by the shelves of commentary in the library, so that they did not need to bring to them their own best resources.

And I thought I found a way of doing that this time because I recognized in the second of Judith's *Two Summers* poems very distinct echoes of *Four Quartets*. Eliot has things to say in these poems. And poetry, to my understanding, is not about saying things, though obviously poems that have interesting things to say are more interesting than poems that don't. And it is not quite accurate to say that they are about dramatizing

the act of saying things or, in the case of an inward poetry, thinking things or, in a quicker and more visceral poetry, perceiving or sensing things. Or at least saying that poetry does these things only takes us partway into them. To go the rest of the way in, one needs a formulation that somehow says that poetry inhabits the interior of the rhythm of its way of seeing, its way of dramatizing what it is to say a thing, or think it, or perceive it, or—taking writing as an act like painting—do it.

In the *Quartets* Eliot is thinking about and has things to say about time. When he was a young man in the 1910s time had been an important philosophical subject and Eliot had, in a postgraduate year in Paris, heard lectures on the subject by the French philosopher Henri Bergson, whose thinking about time had also influenced Marcel Proust. Bergson's subject was lived time, time almost as the fluid we swim in. What the lectures meant to the young Eliot I am not sure. To the middle-aged man in the middle of a war who had survived a very painful marriage that had left him with feelings of irreparable guilt, who had articulated for a generation a sense of chaos and hopelessness and had found his way to Christianity from a longing for order and meaning, and whose path as an artist had taken him to the particular effort at plainness in these poems, time is a resonant subject in ways most of us, I think, recognize instinctively without recourse to philosophical definitions of *temps duré*. In the second of the poems, "East Coker," Eliot puts his subject this way:

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment
Isolated, with no before and after,
But a lifetime burning in every moment
And not the lifetime of one man only
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.
There is a time for the evening under starlight,
A time for the evening under lamplight
(The evening with the photograph album).
Love is most nearly itself
When here and now cease to matter.

One of the traditional ways of teaching poetry is to discuss, to explicate, what Eliot is saying here to make sure that students (and

the teacher) understand what's being said, for the reason that what's being said might be useful to them. And one can try to characterize the feeling of what's being said. And leave it at that. In fact, in teaching poetry, that is quite often what we settle for. We hope that the deeper thing that we can't communicate has gotten communicated, passed directly from the poem to the student reader without our aid or interference. We do what we can with content, especially if, as in this case, the content is rich, psychologically or philosophically. And we do what we can, harder but still manageable, with affect. And we leave the deeper thing in the work of art, which is also famously the most ineffable, its tone or mood, which is like a sensation of echo, which we often take away quite mutely and quietly, in the same way that people do coming out of a concert hall or a theater. In those deepest reaches of a work of art, the truth is that we mostly cannot teach.

But a way of teaching there is by teaching echoes. The deepest response to a work of art is, in fact, another work of art, and occasionally we can find ways of gesturing toward that transmission. The past, Eliot had said elsewhere, is modified in the guts of the living. The way a new work of art grows out of an old one is an instance. It is a process of transmission much like transmission in spiritual traditions and in crafts like painting and acting. I once stood outside a classroom in New York City waiting to pick up a friend who was taking an acting class. I listened from the hallway to the last moments of the class. I had been told that the instructor had studied with Uta Hagen, the actress who had been in the class taught by Lee Krasner where she and Marlon Brando had done a first sight-reading of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. My friend was receiving a transmission. I once heard Ezra Pound's daughter read her father's poems (on a sunlit fall afternoon in California where squirrels were chasing each other in an oak tree outside the large window behind her and the sunlight glinted in those strands of silk insects produced on oak trees). I had heard recordings of her father reading his poems and I had also heard recordings of William Butler Yeats—who was tone-deaf and had a particular very musical way of chanting the cadences of his poems. Pound had picked up from his elder mentor Yeats exactly his cadence, and Mary de Raschwitz, Pound's daughter, had picked up his cadence, so that almost three-quarters of a century after Pound met Yeats in

London and half a world away, that rhythm of hearing the movement of language was still alive and still being transmitted. It was one of those echoes that I thought I heard in Judith's poem.

The last of the quartets, "Little Gidding," centers on the ruin of an old Roman Catholic church associated with Charles Stuart. The narrator of the poem is at once a traveler and a tour guide to this place on a sunny day in midwinter, with brilliant light blazing on the ice, so that wet and cold and fire are gathered to a single image, to a psychological as well as a physical place that seems to be a midwinter summer—outside time, cold and burning at once:

If you came this way,
Taking the route you would be likely to take
From the place you would be likely to come from,
If you came this way in may time, you would find the hedges
White again, in May, with voluptuous sweetness.
It would be the same at the end of the journey,
If you came at night like a broken king,
If you came by day not knowing what you came for,
It would be the same, when you leave the rough road
And turn behind the pigsty to the dull façade
And the tombstone. And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all. Either you had no purpose
Or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
And is altered in fulfillment.

This is Eliot, the artist who turned from the wild and expressive disjunctions of *The Waste Land* to the philosophical verse of these later poems with its dryness and steadiness of tenor. The second-person address seems that of a man speaking to himself about himself and also a voice urging the reader to feel that the experience being described is everyone's experience of journeying, intuitively and a bit blindly, toward some personal meaning.

Earlier, at the beginning of the first poem in the sequence, "Burnt Norton," there is another passage—the one that initiates the poem—that is a more abstract statement of this theme. It is the passage about time

that undergraduates have been explicating for fifty years, encouraged (or tortured) into wrestling with the passage by people like me:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present,
All time is unredeemable.

My desire and bewilderment at nineteen had specifically to do with the feeling that I would never understand what that sentence stood for. I see now that I could only have felt that way if I had already understood the feeling the lines communicate, the quiet dryness and the perplexity at the circularity of thought and the implicit desire for escape or change. And now, also, I think I do understand the lines a little. If one thinks about personal loss, about Judith Stronach, for example, and the difficulty of getting beyond it, and imagines a poetry written by someone who wanted to strip away all sensuous detail, who imagined that sensuous detail didn't need to be there anymore or didn't imagine that it needed to be there, who in a certain way chose to fail to imagine it from a barrenness of grief, one might see how Eliot would come to the desire for an idiom such as this, and would proceed from it in such a way that the sensuous world we hold in the mind would enter the poem only through memory and as it needed to:

If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Toward the door we never opened
Into the rose garden.

Now I tell the students that T. S. Eliot grew up, one boy among three sisters, in a large house in Saint Louis that had a large yard with a hedge and a garden wall and a school for young girls on the other side of the wall whom the young Eliot could hear at their games and with whom he was not allowed to play. It is information that has helped me with these lines:

But to what purpose
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose leaves
I do not know.

Other echoes
Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?
Quick, said the bird, find them, find them,
Round the corner. Through the first gate
Into our first world, shall we follow
The deceptions of the thrush? Into our first world.

When I read these lines now, I also hear the echo of a poem of my wife's that I love. In the first poem in her *Death Tractates*, a sequence of poems about grief at the loss of a close friend and mentor, there are these lines in which the speaker addresses some of the birds of our California coast as if they might be spirit guides, in that way that grief has of looking for signs everywhere:

Tell now red-tailed hawk
(for we have heard the smallest thing cry out beneath you):
have you seen her?
(Red hawk). Thrush walking up
the ragged middle:
have you seen her?

This gives a glimpse of the afterlife of the poem, a sense of its transmission, and it also supplies some literal help with Eliot's phrase "deceptions of the thrush." It reminds me that, in California in the early spring when the thrushes, birds that are rarely visible, build their nests in the thickets along the sides of roads and paths, they will sometimes break out of the thicket when walkers approach and walk down the middle of

a path, trailing a wing, as if injured, to lead the intruder away from the nest. So the deception of the thrush is literal. Though Eliot's anguish took the form of ascetic longings and it is likely that he also meant the figure to imply being deceived by nature and distracted from the demands of spirit. But back to his lines:

Into our first world.
There they were, dignified, invisible,
Moving without pressure, over the dead leaves
In the autumn heat, through the vibrant air,
And the bird called, in response to
The unheard music hiding in the shrubbery,
And the unseen eyebeam crossed, for the roses
Had a look of flowers that are looked at.

And a bit later:

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool as filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
Go, go, go, aid the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

Writing criticism, I would want to make the fullest account that I could of my own understanding of these lines. As a teacher, I don't necessarily want to do that. Or I don't always want to do it. I am inclined to do it sometimes to model for my students how I go about thinking through a poem. But in teaching I think I am often more concerned with bringing them to the poem, to the intensity of life in the poem, in a way that will make them want to do their own thinking about it.

And sometimes setting one poem next to another, showing how the difficult-to-communicate depths of a poem get passed from one writer to another, can be a way of doing that. Which is why I want to end by reading you part of a poem of Judith's called "Every Word Leads to Every Other and No Spaces in Between." Imagine now an American woman in Italy, having read *Four Quartets* and having had some experience of Buddhist practice, thinking about her life and, like Eliot, trying to understand it as a path.

We do not speak of geography,
So shortcuts cannot affect our way.
I cannot even permit your saying, "No shortcuts,"
because the blackbird must sing three notes,
before it sings a fourth,
because there are (movements
to be passed through)
no shortcuts,
because the bubbles that rise to the pond's surface
must work their way through the lily roots
and each concentric circle touch the shore.

I think any attentive reader will hear what the poem takes from Eliot. It is somehow in the tone of Eliot's verse or of his syntax that the arrival desired and described is already there in the feel of the poem, delicately and precariously, before the arrival at a kind of peace, a place of rest, is announced. It is that combination of straightforward saying and the quiet of the just-sketched-in physical details and the precariousness of its sense of spiritual peace—as if it were a saucer brimming with water that needs to be carried carefully so that it doesn't spill—that I hear in Judith's poem. Listen:

This is not geography,
because we cannot foretell
where we are going,
seeing as how we are carried
and know only where we have come,
if we are lucky
by where we were last.

The rose leaf has no destination
when it drops through the trellis
and could not land on the bench
without drifting by the hedge
and does not after all stay

anywhere. A breeze lifts it
beside the cat who comes round the corner
of the hedge to find the lizard,
a surprise impossible to fall upon
by crawling through the hedge
with any idea of shortcut.

I find myself

In a garden of no geography,
And could not have come another way
When I did not even know
This as a place where we would arrive.

I think I can end there.

From Robert Hass,
The Apple Trees at Olema:
New & Selected Poems (2011)

✱

“Why?” he asked. “Because she was lonely,
and angry,” said the friend
 who knew her better,
“and she’d run out of stories.
Or come to the one story.”

✱

✱

After Coleridge and for Miłosz: Late July

I didn’t go hiking with the others this morning
on the dusty trail past the firehouse,
past the massive, asymmetrical, vanilla-scented
Jeffrey pine, among the spikes of buckbrush

and the spicy sage and the gray-green ceanothus,
listening to David's descriptions of the terrifying
efficiencies of a high mountain ecosystem;
the white fir's cost-benefit analysis
of the usefulness of its lower limbs,
the ants herding aphids—they store the sugars
in the aphid's rich excretions—on the soft green
mesas of a mule ear leaf. I think of the old man's
dark study jammed with books in seven languages
as the headquarters of his military campaign
against nothingness. Immense egoism in it,
of course, the narcissism of a wound,
but actual making, actual work. One of the things
he believed was that our poems could be better
than our motives. So who cares why
he wrote those lines about the hairstyle
of his piano teacher in Wilno in the 1920s
or the building with spumy baroque cornices
that collapsed on her in 1942. David and the others
would by now have reached the waterfall.

There were things he could not have known
as he sat beside her on the mahogany bench,
that he could only have seen, or recomposed,
remembering the smell of her powder,
as a sixty-five-year-old man on another continent.
Looking out a small window at an early spring rain:
that, if she taught piano, she was an artistic girl,
that she didn't have family money, that she must have
dreamed once of performing and discovered
the limits of her gift and that her hair,
piled atop her head and, thickly braided,
wound about her beautifully shaped skull
(which the boy with his worn sheaf of Chopin études

would hardly have noticed) was formed
by some bohemian elegance and raffishness
in the style of her music-student youth, so that he,
the poet at the outer edges of middle age,
with what comes after that visible before him
could think unbidden of her reddish Belle Epoque hair
and its powdery faint odor of apricot
that he had not noticed and of the hours
she must have spent, thousands in a lifetime,
tending to her braids, and think that the young,
himself then with his duties and resentments,
are always walking past some already perished
dream of stylishness or beauty that survives
or half-survives in the familiar and therefore tedious,
therefore anonymous, outfitting of one's elders,
and that her gentility would have required
(the rain in green California may have let up
a little and quieted to dripping in the ferns)
the smallest rooms in the most expensive quarter
of the city she could manage—he'd have recalled
then rows of yellow bindings of French novels
on her well-dusted shelves—and this was why
he visited her in that gleaming parlor room
on the Street of St. Peter of the Rock, and why,
he would hear years later in a letter
from a classmate, the stone that crushed her
was not concrete or the local limestone,
but pure chunks of white, carefully quarried
Carerra marble. Something in him identified,
must have, with the darkness he thought
he was contending against. A child practicing
holding its breath, as a form of power,
a threat (but against whom? To extort
what?). Or a lover perfecting a version

of the silent treatment from some strategy
of anticipatory anger at the failure of love.
So he may have had to rouse himself
against the waste, against the vast stupidity
and cruelty and waste and wasted pathos,
to hear the music in which to say that he'd noticed,
after all the years, that her small body
had been crushed expensively. One summer
by that waterfall I saw a hummingbird,
a calliope, hovering and glistening
above the water's spray and the hemlock,
then dropping down into it and rising
and wobbling and beating its furious wings
and dropping again and rising and glistening. The others
should be there by now, and it's possible the bird
is back this year. They'd have made their way
down the dusty trail and over the ledge of granite
to the creek's edge and that cascade of spray.

✱

For C.R.

MOUTH SLIGHTLY OPEN

The body a yellow brilliance and a head
Some orange color from a Chinese painting
Dipped in sunset by the summer gods
Who are also producing that twitchy shiver
In the cottonwoods, less wind than river,
Where the bird you thought you saw
Was, whether you believe what you thought
You saw or not, and then was not, had
Absconded, leaving behind the emptiness
That hums a little in you now, and is not bad
Or sad, and only just resembles awe or fear.
The bird is elsewhere now, and you are here.

FALL

Amateurs, we gathered mushrooms
near shaggy eucalyptus groves
which smelled of camphor and the fog-soaked earth.
Chanterelles, puffballs, chicken of the woods,
we cooked in wine or butter,
beaten eggs or sour cream,
half-expecting to be
killed by a mistake. "Intense perspiration,"
you said late at night,
quoting the terrifying field guide
while we lay tangled in our sheets and heavy limbs,
"is the first symptom of attack."

Friends called our aromatic fungi
liebestoads and only ate the ones
that we most certainly survived.
Death shook us more than once
those days and floating back
it felt like life. Earth-wet, slithery,
we drifted toward the names of things.
Spore prints littered our table
like nervous stars. Rotting caps
gave off a musky smell of loam.

MEDITATION AT LAGUNITAS

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
The idea, for example, that each particular erases
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-
faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk
of that black birch is, by his presence,
some tragic falling off from a first world
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,
because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of *blackberry* corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies.
We talked about it late last night and in the voice
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,
talking this way, everything dissolves: *justice*,
pine, *hair*, *woman*, *you* and *I*. There was a woman
I made love to and I remembered how, holding
her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,
I felt a violent wonder at her presence
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish
called *pumpkinseed*. It hardly had to with her.
Longing, we say, because desire is full
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread,
the thing her father said that hurt her, what
she dreamed. The are moments when the body is as numinous
as words, days that are the good flesh continuing.
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings,
saying *blackberry*, *blackberry*, *blackberry*.

OUR LADY OF THE SNOWS

In white,
the unpainted statue of the young girl
on the side altar
made the quality of mercy seem scrupulous and calm.

When my mother was in a hospital drying out,
or drinking at a pace that would put her there soon,
I would slip in the side door,
light an aromatic candle,
and bargain for us both.
Or else I'd stare into the day-moon of that face
and, if I concentrated, fly.

Come down! come down!
she'd call, because I was so high.

Though mostly when I think of myself
at that age, I am standing at my older brother's closet
studying the shirts,
convinced that I could be absolutely transformed
by something I could borrow.
And the days churned by,
navigable sorrow.

THE WOODS IN NEW JERSEY

Where there was only gray, and brownish gray,
And grayish brown against the white
Of fallen snow at twilight in the winter woods,

Now an uncanny flamelike thing, black
and sulphur-yellow, as if it were dreamed by Audubon,
Is turned upside down in a delicate cascade

Of new green leaves, feeding on whatever mites
Or small white spiders haunt underleafs at stem end.
A magnolia warbler, to give the thing a name.

The other name we give this overmuch of appetite
And beauty unconscious of itself is life.
And that that kept the mind becalmed all winter? —

The more austere and abstract rhythm of the trunks,
Vertical music the cold makes visible,
That holds the whole thing up and gives it form,

or strength—call that the law. It's made,
whatever we like to think, more of interests
than of reasons, trees reaching each their own way

for the light, to make the sort of order that there is.
And what of those deer threading through the woods
In a late snowfall and silent as the snow?

Look: they move among the winter trees, so much
the color of the trees, they hardly seem to move.

THE HARBOR AT SEATTLE

They used to meet one night a week at a place on top of Telegraph Hill to explicate Pound's *Cantos*—Peter who was a scholar; and Linda who could recite many of the parts of the poem that envisioned paradise; and Bob who wanted to understand the energy and surprise of its music; and Bill who knew Greek and could tell them that "Dioce, whose terraces were the color of stars," was a city in Asia Minor mentioned by Herodotus.

And that winter when Bill locked his front door and shot himself in the heart with one barrel of a twelve-gauge Browning over-and-under, the others remembered the summer nights, after a long session of work, when they would climb down the steep stairs that negotiated the cliff where the hill faced the waterfront to go somewhere to get a drink and talk. The city was all lights at that hour and the air smelled of coffee and the bay.

In San Francisco coffee is a family business, and a profitable one, so that members of the families are often on the society page of the newspaper, which is why Linda remembered the wife of one of the great coffee merchants, who had also killed herself; it was a memory from childhood, from those first glimpses a newspaper gives of the shape of the adult world, and it mixed now with the memory of the odor of coffee and the salt air.

And Peter recalled that the museum had a photograph of that woman by Minor White. They had all seen it. She had bobbed hair and a smart suit on with sharp lapels and padded shoulders, and her skin was perfectly clear. Looking directly into the camera, she does not seem happy but she seems confident; and it is as if Minor White understood that her elegance, because it was a matter of style, was historical, because behind her is an old barn which is the real subject of the picture—the

grain of its wood planking so sharply focused that it seems alive, grays and blacks in a rivy and complex pattern of venation.

The back of Telegraph Hill was not always so steep. At the time of the earthquake, building materials were scarce, so coastal ships made a good thing of hauling lumber down from the northwest. But the economy was paralyzed, there were no goods to take back north, so they dynamited the side of the hill and used the blasted rock for ballast, and then, in port again, they dumped the rock in the water to take on more lumber, and that was how they built the harbor in Seattle.

OLD DOMINION

The shadows of late afternoon and the odors
of honeysuckle are a congruent sadness.
Everything is easy but wrong. I am walking
across thick lawns under maples in borrowed tennis whites.
It is like the photographs of Randall Jarrell
I stared at on the backs of books in college.
He looked so sad and relaxed in the pictures.
He was translating Chekhov and wore tennis whites.
It puzzled me that in his art, like Chekhov's,
everyone was lost, that the main chance was never seized
because it is only there as a thing to be dreamed of
or because someone somewhere had set the old words
to the old tune: we live by habit and it doesn't hurt.
Now the *thwack* . . . *thwack* of tennis balls being hit
reaches me and it is the first sound of an ax
in the cherry orchard or the sound of machine guns
where the young terrorists are exploding
among poor people on the streets of Los Angeles.
I begin making resolutions: to take risks, not to stay
in the south, to somehow do honor to Randall Jarrell,
never to kill myself. Through the oaks I see the courts,
the nets, the painted boundaries, and the people in tennis
whites who look so graceful from this distance.

THE IMAGE

The child brought blue clay from the creek
and the woman made two figures: a lady and a deer.
At that season deer came down from the mountain
and fed quietly in the redwood canyons.
The woman and the child regarded the figure of the lady,
the crude roundness, the grace, the coloring like shadow.
They were not sure where she came from,
except the child's fetching and the woman's hands
and the lead-blue clay of the creek
where the deer sometimes showed themselves at sundown.