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STARTING AND KEEPING ON

Two years ago I went to Nebraska for the National Book Foundation. Mostly, I visited Indian reservations, but one day I went to a high school in a tiny town and spoke to students. A nervous teacher suggested that I tell them how I began to write poetry. I told them the stories I've told so many times: At twelve I loved horror movies, and a neighbor boy suggested that I read Edgar Allan Poe, who led me to Keats and Shelley; I loved them all, and wrote revolting nineteenth-century poems until I was fourteen. Then a sophisticated sixteen-year-old introduced me to T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and I wrote revolting twentieth-century poems.

In the front row at the high school, a tall blond boy raised his hand. "Didn't you do it to pick up chicks?"

"Of course!" I told him. "I was forgetting that part!" Surely one of the reasons I began to write poetry was to cut a romantic figure, to fascinate the cheerleaders, whom I couldn't interest by my athletic ability. I wanted to be the solitary phantom walking the streets of the city at night, a black cape flowing behind me, eyes burning like coals. Pasternak said that the pose comes before the poem. The pose didn't work with the cheerleaders, but perhaps with girls who wanted to be actresses. Surely the girls wanted to be actresses in order to pick up guys.

There are silly reasons behind the major motions of our lives, although indeed all human endeavor attempts seduction. There are motives that endure, and that lead to endurance. I think that poets have usually started writing from love of poetry, poetry of the English past. They wanted to make objects like the

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objects that astonished them. John Keats loved Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and wished to be among the English poets when he died. This ambition differs from wanting to be better than Leigh Hunt, or to publish in the *New Yorker*. Milton and Shakespeare and Keats looked to immortality, a notion which comes to seem naïve. (Rilke spoke of the death of the sun.) Literature is a zero sum game: To survive we must replace another poet, and if we replace somebody, we will be replaced ourselves. Needless to say, most poets never place at all—including many Poet Laureates, including many winners of many prizes.

Today, I find that most beginning poets look no further ahead than their own lifetimes, which is doubtless sensible. And maybe the motives for starting to write have become more reactive. We look to inwardness and the sensuous imagination in order to blank out the language and speed of commerce, cell phones on sidewalks, and to cast off the burden of information. Poems are not information, and information is the enemy of art. Under the assault of busy fact, poetry may become more a refuge than a strenuous art. And now, if poets take up their art from love of poetry, the art they love is contemporary or translated. It seldom includes the great sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of English poetry. Almost forty years ago I noticed that bright students of literature who wanted to become poets knew more about poetry of the Tang Dynasty than they knew of Wyatt or Milton or Marvell or Herbert. Translation, or reading in another language, gives us essential infusions from traditions and cultures alien to us; but I think we need also to know the old poetry of our language. Poetry makes poetry. We need old poets not for image-making so much as for sound, for structures not commonly used, for variety in syntax, for resolutions shaped by the language we write in.

A poet's literary sources are more useful the more distant they are, the less like us: thus translations, thus the seventeenth century with its engines of irony and paradox. We use the foreignness of another age, embodied in an antecedent English. When we learn only from the poetry of our own age, we fall into the habits of the age. When we are seventeen, we think that the way to make poetry is known. It helps to look at ways no longer practiced. William Carlos Williams grew up reading Keats. His great poems never resemble his master's, but his assonance is often as luscious as Keats's.

When Eliot wrote about free verse, he said that no verse is free for a man who knows his job, and that traditional English meter lurks behind the arras—which is no longer true. Free verse lurks behind free verse, and therefore our poetry comes out of Whitman and the twentieth century. To absorb the older poets, we need one piece of equipment most of us lack. We cannot read the poets of the past if we don't hear their meter, and we won't learn to hear meter by reading a book about prosody, any more than we learn to ride a bicycle by reading a manual. We learn the English metrical line by immersing ourselves in it. We learn the language by living in the country, not because we *should* write in meter, but in order to learn from our ancestors.

The life lived is the first source of poems, and we cannot live our lives in order to write out of them. We cannot control many other sources, but there are things that we can do, to help ourselves keep on. We need on purpose to plunder the store of the world. Our reading of literature must be interested or larcenous. Look at the origins and sources of Eliot's poetry. He read a book he found in the Harvard Union library, Arthur Symons on the symbolist poets. Discovering Laforgue's irony, Eliot arrived at his youthful tone. By the time he wrote *The Waste Land* he had studied the Jacobean playwrights and pillaged the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Still, the greatest influence on *The Waste Land*—besides Eliot's nervous breakdown—came from prose. Its major strategies derive from Joyce's *Ulysses*. Later even Walt Whitman, seemingly the far side of Eliot's moon, became a resource for *Four Quartets*.

When we read with an eye for what we can use, we take pleasure and then exploit our pleasure. We read with curiosity and greed. Think of Ezra Pound's acquisitiveness. Going to the origins of his own language, Pound translated "The Seafarer," and found noises that became central to the evolution of his work.

May I for my own self song's truth reckon,
 Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days
 Hardship endured oft.

And Pound went to other languages. There was Provençal for the young Pound, and the mellifluous Greek pacing and assonance of "The Return":

ore." She used to repeat, "The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass," as if she were chanting a mantra. Then she studied a poet from another language. In the five years she spent translating Anna Akhmatova—with Vera Sandomirsky Dunham, a brilliant scholar of Russian poetry—she felt she learned more about writing poems than from any other source. Later she read Elizabeth Bishop with a studious larceny. Just before she took sick, Jane began to study Emily Dickinson, and wrote Alice Mattison that she was beginning to discover some remarkable things about Dickinson's structures. We'll never know what.

There are resources even in literary criticism. We should read the poet-critics, like the table talk of Ben Jonson, when in his cups he talked with Drummond of Hawthornden. At one point Jonson said that John Donne warranted hanging for want of keeping the accent, at another that Donne was the best poet in the world, in some things. It's poet-talk, the original *Paris Review* interview. Read Coleridge, Wordsworth's "Preface," Keats in his letters, Pound, Eliot. The best critics in English are all poets.

On the other hand there is disinterested reading, unpredictable gifts awarded to curiosity—reading without larcenous intention, sometimes resulting in accidental larceny. In middle age I found Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, and his prose entered my verse, especially in a long poem called *The One Day*. I was overwhelmed by the beauty and utility of Gibbon's syntax, by the way he imparted ambivalent judgment in the construction of his sentences, irony by grammar and word-order. He will tell us that "the emperor coerced or perhaps persuaded; the emperor persuaded or rather coerced." At first we want to say, "Make up your mind, Mr. Gibbon," but then we realize that we are instructed to take the two verbs, qualified by "rather" or "perhaps," and gather a range of possible judgments. Gibbon's prose displays disparate feelings and ideas, apparently contradictory, and combines them into the single body of a sentence. Embodiment of oxymoron is poetry's principle task. In poetry as in human life, north is south and south is north. Bloom is Odysseus, Odysseus is Bloom.

Some poets read the philosophers, but reason tends to deny that north can be south, and I take the poet's part in the old

war between the philosophers and the poets. Still, in my disinterested reading I have been able to steal from philosophers who make startling apothegms—like Nietzsche, like Meister Eckhart, like Heraclitus: “God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger; but he changes like olive oil which, when it is mixed with perfumes, gets its name from the scent of each.” The identity of opposites in Heraclitus resembles Freud’s thinking, and resembles the dynamic paradoxes that drive poetry. Emerson the maker of sentences invented the notion that God is dead by saying that God was not dead. Addressing the students at Harvard, he made a string of negative assertions, including “God is not dead.” To suggest that God is not dead is to suggest that God might be dead. Every denial suggests affirmation, every affirmation denial. North is south is north.

Poets find resources in the other arts by making analogies to poetry. More poets seem to take inspiration from painting and sculpture than do from music. Maybe the time-art of poetry makes use of analogy to a space-art. (There are musical exceptions: for Whitman, Italian opera was a major resource; American jazz has left its mark, not only on Americans.) Painting and painters have been resources for many poets. I feel closer to sculpture, to weight and touch over illusion. Da Vinci exalted painting over sculpture because it carried its own light; I like the real heft and thinginess of sculpture. For a few years I spent time with Henry Moore, and learned useful attitudes toward art and work. He was determined to compete, not with his contemporaries, not with Epstein or Hepworth or Archipenko, but with Michelangelo and Donatello. From listening to Moore on sculpture, I learned more about writing poetry than I did from talking with older poets. Frequently he quoted notions from Rodin: Never think of a surface except as the extension of a volume. Rodin said that an old craftsman told him, when they worked in a stonemason’s establishment, to carve those roses as if they were pushing right up at you. In poetry, the energy of its import—what William Stafford called its underneath language—pushes upward against the surface of its statement.

And Moore said, quoting Rodin again: If you are a young sculptor making a maquette and it’s not going right, don’t keep on jabbing at it with your tools; drop it on the floor and see

what it looks like then. Comical as it is, this advice can help a poet. When the poem won't come together, change its form. Turn long-lined end-stopped free verse into short-lined enjambed free verse, or into syllabics, or into a sonnet sequence.

Moore loved the sense of sculpture as tactile—the feel of surface and weight, the sense of roughness to hands, the strain of muscle—art absorbed through the body. I claim we read poetry with our bodies—with our mouths that savor vowels and chew on consonants; with our legs and hands that dance or keep time.

Moore talked about size and scale. The size of a piece is its measure in inches or meters. Its scale is its monumentality—impact, sensuousness, power. There are sculptures in hotel lobbies that loom huge—enormous in an atrium, twenty-five feet tall—but remain minuscule in scale and therefore disgusting. On the other hand, if the size of a piece is small but its scale is large, this disparity strengthens it. There's an often-photographed carving by Moore from the 1930s, referred to as his "Chacmool" because of its archaic Mexican source. It looks huge when it is pictured, but it is thirty-seven inches long. In a Tate Museum catalogue, a photograph of a two-part reclining figure occupies a full page, appearing enormous. It renders a bronze maquette that stretches a monumental eight-and-a-quarter inches. There is wit, conflict, and energy in the contrast: small size, great scale. Sculptural equality, large size together with large scale, especially works outdoors, where the sculpture's size and scale competes with buildings around it, or with trees and hills.

There are poems in which size overwhelms scale, bluster or rhetoric or inflation covering small import. Old examples disappear into the scholar's study. William Morris's interminable poems are huge and small, like Longfellow's Americanist epics, like eighteenth-century disquisitions about fish, like Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body*. But poems need not be book-length for size to exceed scale. Inappropriate grandiosity may disfigure short or middle-length poems. I think of the progress and regress of James Dickey. In an early poem like "The Heaven of Animals" we find a taut, satisfying correlation—greater scale than size, internal volume pressing upward to the surface. By the time of "Falling" and "May Day Sermon,"

rhetoric and willpower expand the poem beyond its potential. The poem turns into the globe in the Marriott lobby.

When some poets age into fame they inflate like the walrus in Macy's parade. Maybe mania takes over. Compare the average density of Berryman's 77 *Dream Songs* with the average density of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*. Compare the energy and power of Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle* and *Life Studies* to the slackness of the late poems. Among other things, poetic density is the loaded rift: "The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass." Let me suggest an alternative definition of density and scale by way of number. Scale is determined by the number of units resolved, relative to the size of the whole, and relative to the disparity of the units, their distance from each other. North and south. When incomparable things—hate and love and melanoma and dogturds and vaginal orgasms and daylilies—come together to make a whole, we have a complex single object in which scale equals or exceeds size. Poetry exists to embody elements that appear impossible to reconcile, opposing notions that occupy the same point in the human psyche at the same time. Catullus: "Odi et amo." These contradictions occupy the inward places of all human beings.

Many short poems are monumental, and their brevity exalts their power. For a short poem huge in scale, think of Thomas Wyatt's "They Flee From Me," especially its first two stanzas:

They fle from me that sometyme did me seke
 With naked fote stalking in my chambre.
 I have sene theim gentill tame and meke
 That nowe are wyld and do not remembre
 That sometyme they put theimself in daunger
 To take bred at my hand; and nowe they raunge
 Besely seking with a continuell chaunge.

Thancked be fortune, it hath ben othrewise
 Twenty tymes better; but ons in speciall,
 In thyn arraye after a pleasaunt gyse,
 When her lose gowne from her shoulders did fall,
 And she me caught in her armes long and small;
 Therewith all swetely did me kysse,
 And softly saide, *dere hert, howe like you this?*

The poem is multiple, diverse, and brief. There are monumental sonnets by Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, Hopkins, Frost, and Hill. Or think of Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle, "One Art." Or think of Hardy; always think of Hardy. Emily Dickinson is as brief as she is monumental. *The Waste Land*, medium length, triumphs in scale over size. Some tiny poems by Robert Creeley feel larger than twenty-page sequences. Of course Wordsworth's first *Prelude*, and Milton's epic, embody size and scale together. So does "Song of Myself" but not "Evangeline." In fewer lines, but not so brief as a sonnet, Marvell's "Horatian Ode" is immeasurably greater in scale than in size. The same is true for Marvell's other best brief poems—while his lengthy unread satires lack scale. Intended for a political moment, they are shallow or crude in their contrasts and contradictions; when their moment vanished so did they.

My acquaintance with Henry Moore was accidental, but it became a resource and an encouragement to art that is long in life that is short. I have quoted this anecdote many times in print; I will quote it until I die: When I saw Moore the year he turned eighty, I asked him, in a jocular manner I hope, to tell me the secret of life. Without jocularly he answered that the secret was to devote yourself entirely to one end, to one goal, and to work every day toward this goal, to put all your energy and imagination into the one endeavor. The only necessity was that this goal be unattainable.