

---

## REMAINING UNPREPARED

GARY SNYDER

### 1. All the arts

Good writing, whether poetry or prose, is one of the arts. It's an art along with painting, music, sculpture, dance, drama, and more. The arts at their best are callings, vocations to which some are drawn without even knowing it, and not necessarily careers or professions.

Painters and sculptors, musicians, dancers, singers and storytellers, mythmakers and ritualists are refracted throughout societies and classes from the courts on down to county-fair vaudeville jokesters and tricksters. High and low art and drama march from the sublime to the scurrilous, forwarded by great talents, who have been the delight and the worry of dozens of cultures for centuries. The arts can inspire and elevate, and if the skill is there they can make a putrid fish as magical as an angel.

The materials for all the arts are perfectly ordinary and widely available. Sound is everywhere, pleasant or unpleasant, music or noise, yet as music becomes something else. The materials of sculpture are material; dance is rhythm and motion, which we see around us all the time. Poetry and prose are made simply from language, a sea in which we swim from babyhood on, and the gathered mental world of ideas, memories, feelings, and opinions.

The accomplishments of great arts and artists are woven into social history. The arts cannot be forced entirely into the service of any religion or ideology, though they do serve for a while here and there. To be a serious

---

The Hopwood Lecture, presented April 24, 2013, at the University of Michigan

artist is to be obsessed with the craft, with the work. Both crazy and sane, both disciplined and goofily free, celibate or profligate, artists baffle themselves, their families, their societies. Sometimes they are superb negotiators and businesspersons. Sometimes they die poor and alone. They deal with the actuality of the phenomenal world, and ultimately are not servants of anybody's ideals.

Vajrayana (Tibetan Buddhist) religious philosophy invokes the "Three Mysteries" which are the body, language, and the mind. These are what is closest to us and most taken for granted and yet of which we know virtually nothing. The practice of meditation is undertaken with the intention of getting closer to these "mysteries"—of becoming as intimate with them as possible—to better grasp how to be in the world while still alive and thus die prepared.

Form and color for painters and sculptors, sound for composers, musicians, and dancers, and language for playwrights, novelists, creative writers, and most poets. The language arts predate our official program of literature, which usually starts with the ancient Semites and Greeks, by millennia. Hundreds of prior centuries of song and story, riddles, jokes, and spells—myths and performances—come before Gilgamesh, Abraham, or Homer.

The scholar-linguist Leonard Bloomfield did make an anthropologist's definition of literature that works in all cases. He wrote that literature consists of "notable utterances." This is an all-inclusive approach to the question—since most of humanity did not have reading and writing as one of their life tools until just a few centuries ago. Even in the cultures that produced high literature, the majority of the people entertained themselves with oral stories, play and party songs, courting songs, and the long epic narratives—tales of wars and journeys, all of which are the bedrock of human language arts. This is so ancient and established that there is no danger of it being swept away in an age of technology. To the contrary, the mythic and dramatic themes of earlier times are continually redeployed today, especially in film.

But for the present moment, I will speak of the nature of "good writing" and in particular (being primarily a poet myself), I will talk about poetry. And so, I have arrived at my topic for our talk today.

## 2. Good writing

Taking poetry as our field, we'll look at what seems to make some poems powerful, good, notable, and worthy of keeping.

When my friend the professor John Felstiner showed me a draft of his recent book *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* my first response was to say "Ha!" meaning "As if!" but then, reflecting on the specifics, I again said "Ha!—but, what else?" And really meaning it that way. (I ended up writing a more normal sort of commendation for the book.) It's a field guide to poetry and sort of an anthology, published by Yale, and starting with some very early English poems but coming down most strongly on the last one hundred years. It's a book that will keep you reading, catching up on poets you might have long forgotten. These are many of the poets of the English canon, the officially accepted list of major writers, though always subject to revision as times and tastes change. The fact is, each poem would have to be taken up on its own to judge what made it last—but I like Robert Duncan's saying that any poem that can be taken seriously as poetry rather than scattered ramblings or kitchen lists or complaints or personal euphoria, personal suffering and such, has to have magic and music. I would add that it should probably also be interesting.

The word *poem*, "a making" in early Greek, (*poema*), a created bit of language, as chant, or song; a bit of language with play or surprise in it, a shuffle of the grammar, a catchy turn. And, properly, not selling something—not there to encourage you to some sort of social action, though it might make you want to dance, or hike, or dig the garden, look for some old photos—but not programmatic. And there are always exceptions, one of the great roles that poems have played and still do is to protest, and to argue for justice, sanity, peace, in critical times—as did Ginsberg's most famous poem "Howl" or Bly's "The Teeth Mother Naked at Last" during the Viet Nam War. But such poems usually fade a bit, as the details retreat into the past.

A poem might be sometimes so intimate that something you wouldn't dare say to your lover you would publish nationwide (and hope he or she sees it). In any case, it brings you back to the world and out of yourself. To be a writer or a poet one needs to keep up a single-pointed dedication to the practice, and in the case of literature this generally means a willingness, for starters, to be a deep reader. This is not trivial. We live in an era when it seems there's not much need to read, yet the great and ground-breaking lit-

erary (and historical and philosophical ) work of the past was and mostly still is in books. Books are hardy items and can be borrowed—make use of them! Libraries are good too: they have chairs, excellent bathrooms, hot water, electric lights, heat, and they're free.

But more to the point: in checking out the past you learn what's been done before, get a sense of the craft, the huge human passion and energy of all these lifetimes, and are reminded not to try and reinvent the wheel. In language terms one learns what changes one's own spoken language has gone through. I've always enjoyed reading Shakespeare and earlier writers in uncorrected original editions with diverse spellings and older slang, older vocabularies. I like to listen to BBC radio and catch the different pronunciations and downright dialects, I try out the difficult and unaccustomed phonemes of Cantonese or Hindi or Haida, just to feel them in my mouth and head. One can learn to use the glottal stop as a consonant, as in Scots or Hawaiian. An older English term is "word-choard" for what a writer or tale-teller can draw on in their discourse. Know your word-choard, and enlarge it.

So in the past I told my poetry workshop students (at UC Davis) that the quantity of notable poetry in this English language is finite, and that one could read it all in a few months. Why not? A good idea. It will be with you always afterward. It does no harm to be open enough to read the traditional ballads of the north English/Scottish border, the "Child Ballads" and other collections. Some of our western plains working cowboy songs came, via the mountains of the Carolinas, from Scottish ballads. The ballad meter (or "common meter") is ubiquitous in country and western songs even today. Emily Dickinson and Bob Dylan both made use of it.

(The organizers of the annual Cowboy Poetry gathering in Elko, Nevada are gently urging the participants who come every year to experiment a bit with modern free verse, since most of them are still attached to ballad meter. One major poet of cattle and ranching, Drummond Hadley, has never written in meter—always open-form poetry—and surprisingly, is one of the few rancher poets who actually speaks of cows, dogs, horses, and women as though they were people. His *Voice of the Borderlands*, which came from years of ranching on the Arizona/Mexico border, is a precious collection.)

But the question remains: what makes writing good? For starters, good ingredients. That's why (aside from the fact that learning is good for you) we

can say that one's writing benefits enormously from good thinking. True facts, new facts, insights, corrections of old misperceptions, or really grisly and scary well-said errors or horrors—the real world is our ultimate teacher—and as you'll hear again, great art is beyond good and evil. But it is never evil. Art is not church either.

I will say a little more about my own induction into the world of being a working writer.

### 3. Learning

My parents were early Depression waifs, my father suddenly unemployed and my mother a drop-out from the University of Washington English Department. Her fundamentalist Christian mother had forbidden her to go to college because it would make her worldly. So finally she sneaked out of the house when her mother was away, with a small amount of luggage, and took the streetcar from south Seattle to the university. She camped a while in the basement of one of the women's dormitories. Soon in the English Department, she published a poem in their little magazine *The Lariat*. That was ninety years ago this spring.

The following year she met my father at a party, and they ended up going to Mount Baker Lodge for the summer as workers. A couple years later, still unemployed, they moved into a one-room cabin that had been abandoned for a decade north of Seattle, with a toddler (me), a trunk, and a chest of tools. They settled down and began to farm.

I started reading right after first grade. There were only two books in the house (The King James Bible and Robert Browning), but we took an almost weekly trip to north Seattle—not that far away from our place—and I got books from the University Branch Seattle Public Library. My mother was a self-absorbed and difficult person, so we rarely went to see my paternal grandparents or relatives. Instead I was reading constantly. That's why I once wrote that in these times "books are our grandparents." It's even better if you have both. As for many others in the Depression-era Pacific Northwest, the public library opened up the world for me.

My other teachers were the extensive logged-over forest land that surrounded our small farm, the elderly Salish Indian who came by monthly in an ancient little truck selling smoked salmon, and my father's accounts of "unemployed workers' league" meetings. Being poor I learned—with my kid's

camping and fishing gear, to “make it, make it over, make do, or do without”—a Depression-era mantra. I kept on reading and listening, right on through the children’s room and into the rest of the library. By the time the war and jobs came and we moved to Portland, I had a pretty good picture of what was going on in the world.

I wouldn’t mention mountaineering if it weren’t what got me started in poetry. From Portland you can clearly see the snowpeaks Adams, Hood, and Saint Helens (and from selected spots, Rainier). It was only a matter of time before I would go to them. The YMCA camp at the foot of Mount Saint Helens and the fine old Portland mountain-climbing club the Mazamas made it possible and provided good training. Trying to find a language to describe and evoke the snowy world above the clouds—rising in the dark to go clattering up a glacier, speedy glissading in blinding sunlight down steep soft snowfields—challenged what I knew of Whitman and other early American poets. So there it is: an occasional need to express yourself from some passionate and intense position. Most young people start writing poems from love and its disappointments. I started from the climber’s demanding world of discomfort and danger, and its exhilaration. I found love as a subject later—even more dangerous—and harder to forget.

Then came the language of feeling. Disappointments, infatuations, and contradictions in the world and in yourself were explored in the all-too-well-known lyric poem. But once in college and exposed to people older and smarter than myself, I realized that my idea of poetry was pathetic, and I burned a few things. I read Williams, Stevens, Eliot, and Pound (as we all did) and went into much more intellectual territory. Maybe what saved me was eighteenth-century English literature. People often don’t like the eighteenth century, but I found it fascinating to see that there was a long period in English poetry in which writers rejected the direct language of the senses as well as the language of feeling in favor of irony, wit, satire, and parody. They explored the arrogant and often very funny but wicked devices by which upper-class people slash each other. Also, the intellectual gamesmanship of the emerging educated middle class of journalists and essayists and political theorists was fascinating. Alexander Pope (Great Anarch!), John Dryden, and the divine Dr. Samuel Johnson were for me not boring.

But finally, under the influence of a Chinese-American GI Bill veteran of World War II I was steered toward reading Chinese poems in translation,

and got a start on Japan—R. H. Blyth in particular—and I realized that there were East Asian alternatives to the elegant detachment of the eighteenth century, the goopy engagement of the Romantics, and the erudite Modernists. East Asian poetry seemed, at least, to be secular, non-mythological, and close to daily life—as informed by learning, etiquette, and history. Though I had to revise my ideas of East Asian literature once I studied it more deeply, learning some literary Chinese and practicing the characters, I know that these three virtues remain a big part of Chinese, Korean, and Japanese literature. In the spring of 1956 I went to live in Japan for some years, and in the Buddhist world learned that there is also “nature”—“mind”—and “no nature.”

#### 4. Unlearning

It has to be said: learning and dedication per se do not an artist make. There is the strange and eccentric, or unpredictable, quality of knack, or talent, or mysterious ability, that can make a breathtaking difference. Some have tried to take on, simply, the eccentricity and make that their artistic poster. But there have been poets, who defied (defined) both ends of the spectrum. Wallace Stevens was not eccentric (though he was an amazing walker), but his poems hold unexpected depths. Allen Ginsberg’s wonderful freedom and compassion were matched by a personal long-standing lack of confidence, and many of his poems, when stripped down, are quite sane. Both Ginsberg and Stevens were aware of the spiritual and philosophical area called “emptiness” but each approached it differently. In both cases, the path that would lead there was not “learning,” it was “unlearning”—as in the Daoist sense of making yourself plain and not insisting on results.

There’s a realm that is both art and spirit, is both elusive and totally present—we are all “apprenticed to the same teacher, Reality,” and this is not the teaching of any particular religion or school. It has working limits with birth at one end and death at the other, but not much more is known. Living in that, living with it, is probably what Lorca meant when he invoked *duende*—I think he must have read the *Dao De Jing*, too, which is a text about a Way that cannot be followed. But first, we must learn to follow the trail.

So learn to keep a sharp knife by, and some matches. And a notebook. And having cast a cold eye on a lot of your own work, then be available for a surprise visit, a big bird that grabs you by the shoulders and tosses you like

a rag, and leaves you with the words and lines and rhythms that you didn't have before. This is a way of saying that the poem forces its way into you but not so roughly that you can't dodge it and forget it. But: you should open the door (even if it means stopping what else you might be doing). This is how good poems come—occasionally—to let you know you are really there. If you fail to recognize them, they'll be gone and, after a few more tries, give up on you and go elsewhere. A little poem came to me, late in the evening, as I stepped beyond our Sierra high country campfire on a frosty fall night to see if what I heard were deer moving around. It became a poem for being available to poems:

*How Poetry Comes to Me*

It comes blundering over the  
Boulders at night, it stays  
Frightened outside the  
Range of my campfire  
I go to meet it at the  
Edge of the light

I have kept up this exercise of “unlearning” and the study of East Asian literature and thought over the years. I offer what follows not as instruction or a model to follow, but simply as information about what some people (and some fine Chinese and Japanese poets and artists) have done.

I turned to Buddhist studies not for the sake of poetry but for insight. The clarity and soberness of early Indian Buddhist teachings, the exuberant flight of Mahayana Buddhist philosophical boldness, and the further manifestations of Buddhist-based teachings in Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan are a world treasure. I made my choice for the Chan/Zen line of practice and ended up in Kyoto living in and around Zen temples for over a decade.

The Zen tradition laughingly scolded painters and poets within its ranks, but a serious level of aesthetic innovation and production was part of that school and still is. Yet it was not for poetry but simply for understanding that I followed this path, realizing that the skill, compassion, and insight that some people bring to cooking, teaching, business, farming, administration, or house-cleaning make them all into potential artists of daily life.

From one standpoint, art is for beginners and the truly “cooked” people

of the world see the whole phenomenal universe as a multifaceted marvel. But in any case, there is no substitute for learning to walk, sing, and dance. One result of my own residence in the Old Capital was to make me appreciate the deep history of humanity, the authenticity and unknown intelligence of nonhuman beings, the worth of the planet, and the ancient ritualistic and shamanistic roots of poetry and particularly poetic drama. For this last I attended many day-long performances of Noh plays, and from that came a great appreciation for the value of performance.

#### 4. Performance

For millennia, oral literature was circulated by the performances of raconteurs or singers or drama/dance groups, with or without a few little musical instruments. The discovery, or rediscovery, of the power of poetry readings in the midfifties—which led to an era of regular poetry readings all over the world, in coffee shops, bars, bookstores, art galleries, cultural centers, libraries, churches, and most importantly, colleges and universities, was perhaps the most transformative event in my own literary life. It demonstrated that there was a social role for poetry on a large contemporary scale, and that the poems and their readers supplied something that the media had failed to tap. (Part of that was simply in the power of groups assembling to hear a real person in a real voice. There is no substitute for presence. But the poetry, if crummy, will drive the audience rightfully away.)

It had never been part of my youthful plan to go around and give poetry readings, but over the years, whenever I was in North America, I was regularly invited to do that. In the last forty years, since I returned to live primarily in northern California, I was on the road about eight times a year until my wife's health required that I be mostly home. (In my next life I hope I can try writing plays.)

I was in Hokkaido the summer of 1971 trying to learn more about the Ainu and the big East Asian Brown Bear. There I heard—from the Ainu—that animals enjoy listening to human musicians and singers, and even just hearing conversations. I glimpsed how the nonhuman realm must enjoy our buzz and flash (or at least used to). That led me to saying, later, when asked what do we give to nature in exchange for all we get from it, "Performance. Music." And, "we sing to the fish or the game, speak words to them, say grace. A song for your supper. Performance is currency in the deep world's gift

economy.” The Canadian actor and essayist Ronald Grimes produced a performance based on these lines. (The French anthropologist Marcel Mauss wrote a book called *Essai sur le Don* years ago and Lewis Hyde, much later, a book with the title *The Gift*, proposing the idea that gift exchange was the first sort of economic transaction. In addition, Hyde goes as much into art as gift.)

The Japanese Noh drama makes good use of masks, dance, drums, and little yelps. It is also considered the highest of high-class art forms. I had the good luck to attend dozens of day-long performances over the years. The play *Yamamba (Old Mountain Woman)* became a source for part of my *Mountains and Rivers without End*—the second of my book-length poems.

Poetic drama is much reduced these days though it’s always worth a try—and the epic has, in a sense, been replaced by the long nonlinear mythopoetic reach typified by Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* and William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson*.

I hesitate to bring up the term *wild* at this point, since I have been saying so much about nature, oral literature, and performing as a kind of gift to the wild. But I will remind us all to remember that the term *wild*, which is a name for a process, or a condition within that process, of being self-managing without the agency of human beings. It refers to a kind of intrinsic order, and not really to some big craziness or far-out freedom. A wild horse is a horse living its own life in its own space. A “wild Indian” (as the cavalry used to say) the same. So it’s no surprise that Claude Levi-Strauss some years back said that art survives in contemporary developed world culture, and in the highly educated mind of some of its peoples, as a kind of “wilderness area” of consciousness. In my book of essays *The Practice of the Wild* I explored that thought a bit further and argued that good art is wild, and that language itself is fundamentally a part of our wild human mind-body system, as is our imagination, and in fact our very consciousness. Not that order and agriculture don’t have a place in the scheme. But here’s what the difference between “wild” language and “domesticated writing” would look like: If the Artist wanted to become “domesticated”—he or she would:

Increase yield.  
Standardize the product.  
Regularize the schedule for production.

Reduce production time and costs.  
Shape it to fit the largest available market.  
Outsource the grunt work to others and pay them as little as possible.

All of us, as writers, have written, fully aware to some degree, in this domesticated or agricultural model. It's efficient, necessary, and in its own way worthy. It also calls for clarity, which is a big part of good writing. Being a writer employed on an ongoing TV show, in an ad agency, in some department of information, in any situation where the writing has a specific purpose, even in journalism, or gun or car or house beautiful magazines, one is professionally working toward a successful outcome. The only drawback is that your mind might get so pulled around that you can no longer do your own kind of writing, or even have the will to do so. Better go ride your bicycle this weekend.

Really good writing doesn't have much of a market. But doing something well, especially one of the arts, is its own reward, far beyond salary. Teaching writing, or any art, is worthy work too—I recently learned that the great haiku poet Basho supported himself by teaching haiku-writing classes. And he travelled the countryside from house to house of affluent farmers, enjoying the teaching, the housing, and the adulation, for a number of years.

#### **In closing—**

Perhaps I have made poetry sound like a big and complicated project. It isn't always. I like the way haiku works in the world of poetry. These small tight poems are still written, daily, by the tens of thousands, all over Japan. So are the parallel *senryu* (sardonic poems in the haiku form with more wit and fewer flowers). Many newspapers have a daily haiku/senryu page, publish a small number and sometimes a daily commentary and critique of chosen poems. Nobody expects to be great. There are gatherings of the haiku clubs, dining and drinking and singing, and a refined sort of haiku analysis and judgment is possible—but nobody gets too sad if they never win prizes. It is democratic, nationwide, nonelite, inexpensive, and instructive because you learn to watch the weather, the seasons, the plants, the oddities and vagaries of humanity and the wild world too. They are not much studied in the uni-

versity because that's where all the other literature of the world has to be studied.

In a similar way I watch and admire the poets, even in my own neighborhood, who teach poetry in the schools. What they teach is the invigorating freedom to forget about proper English and just let your imagination go free. The kids are told that you can tell a lie if you want, write exactly what you please. This is a small and valuable little space for imagination and creativity in a curriculum that can't offer much of that any more—and the children love it. For almost fifty years now these programs have been out in the schools—including in the boonies—and they do and will make a silent contribution to the ongoing creativity and freedom of spirit of America youth.

Jack Collom in his recent book of poems and notes on teaching experiences, *Second Nature*, quotes a first grader's working on the assigned "going inside poem" idea:

I would like to go inside myself.  
I would like my brain to be a table.  
My heart could be my kid.  
Inside my hand could be my husband,  
and then I could have my bones for a pet.

Honey Jackson  
grade 1  
Paradox Valley, Colorado

I titled this talk "Remaining Unprepared." If Honey Jackson had been given much preparation other than a topic, I doubt she could have written this absolutely surprising little utterance that she will later in life be baffled by (or not—if she goes on in life as person who does poems from time to time.)

It was Hakuin the Zen Master who wrote, "True nature that is no nature, Far beyond mere doctrine" and Dogen who said "Mind is roof-tiles and fence-posts." From a BLM land manager I learned "The perfect is the enemy of the good."

And here is the complete quote from which my title is taken, a line from the marvelous haiku poet Buson.

More than anything else, it is important to remain unprepared for verse writing.

Yosa Buson (1716–1784)