Notes toward a Craft Lecture

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1

I am not telling you what I know, but what I believe. Therefore, you cannot outsmart me with logical rebuttals. If I wanted to be outsmarted with logic and reason, I would have become a philosopher. As W. B. Yeats said, “You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence.” In this spirit, I am the Song of Sixpence, not—trust me—the Saint.

2

People who write aphorisms tend not to be able to maintain critical thought beyond the terra firma of the current paragraph. In seeking elegance they often settle for simplicity. Don’t trust them—trust me on this.

3

There is nothing I can tell you that the last or next craft lecture might not or should not untell. There is no unit of advice so canny that it could not be proven wrong by your own experience. The job of listeners, of readers and students, is to maintain an omnivorous appetite for everything he or she is offered, and then a ruthlessness in discerning what to believe for themselves. (And let me add that I am a student among you.) We learn a tradition in order to overthrow traditions. In attempting to overthrow tradition, we become it instead. If we’re lucky.
But there is no such thing as “the tradition.” Or if there is, we make the one out of many, and out of ourselves. “The names of poets included in the canon are engraved on alabaster,” Marilyn Nelson writes, “but there’s lots of empty space on those tablets. The canon is steadily undergoing formation, both vertically and—more recently—horizontally. The future will applaud our generation’s widening of the stream. We must not, however, as we widen the course of the canon make its bed shallow. [. . .] Too often we ignore the fact that tradition is process.” If we continue with Nelson’s metaphor of the canon as river, then we can modify Heraclitus to say that we never step in the same canon twice. We are always working at it—tradition, T. S. Eliot reminds us, is something we create behind us as we travel, a ship’s long wake. Tradition cannot be inherited. It must be obtained “by great labour.”

That labor is craft, which is—in theory, at least—my subject. But talk about craft is always a poorly disguised attempt to talk about life. A philosophical symposium in a Groucho Marx mustache. When we ask or talk about how to write, we are also talking about how to live—how to look and listen and feel. Which brings us back to the philosophers again. And to the theologians and critical theorists and, of course, the writers. But we writers keep a different covenant than the rest do.

The covenant, of course, is with language. “As a rule,” W. H. Auden wrote, “the sign that a beginner has a genuine original talent is that he [or she] is more interested in playing with words than in saying something original.”
It’s a good thing, because there is no originality. Four thousand years ago we were already lamenting our inability to say anything new. “We could go back,” Walter Jackson Bate writes in *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*, “to an almost forgotten Egyptian scribe of 2000 B. C. [. . .] who inherited in his literary legacy no Homer, Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, or Dickens—no formidable variety of literary genres available in thousands of libraries—yet who still left the poignant epigraph: ‘Would I had phrases that are not known, utterances that are strange, in new language that has not been used, free from repetition, not an utterance which has grown stale, which men of old have spoken.”

What does one do, then?

Option A: Not write. To many of us, this is an unacceptable solution.
Option B: Write. To many of our friends, love interests and families this, too, is an unacceptable solution. Yet here we are.

What shall we do, Fine Line, who stand between the poem and nothing?

—Mark Strand
What does one do?

We cannot be original. We cannot do nothing. But we can listen to Auden; we can play with words. But if we are to do so we must also consider the nature of play. Johan Huizinga’s description of play, described in his book *Homo Ludens* (“Man Playing”), sounds to me suspiciously similar to a description of the nature of poetry.

“Play is superfluous,” he writes. “The need for it is only urgent to the extent that the enjoyment of it makes it a need.” (8)

—Play “is free, is in fact freedom.” (8)
—“Play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life.” (9)
—“Play is distinct from ‘ordinary’ life both as to locality and duration.” (9)
—Play “creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme.” (10)
—Play is “an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it.” (13)

You realize that by playing with words you get to experiment not only with how things sound but what they are, and what you are. To play with words is to play with—to inhabit more fully—the medium of our conscious thought, with the medium of our very being. This is why play is one of the most serious things we can do.
What is it in language that we seek? Something unsayable, said. “Poeticity,” as Roman Jakobson calls it—the quality of the poetic—“the word felt as a word.” Some essence that by definition resists definition. But—to modify Justice Potter Stewart on pornography—you know it when you hear it.

“In poetry,” as the sculptor Henry Moore writes, “there is something which is not easily explainable. If it were, it would be like the public monuments in squares—one passes and does not look.”

Whatever else you write about, your writing is always—first, foremost, and finally—about its medium, about language.

Benjamin Paloff writes that “poetry is the name we give to language’s subversion of itself, the use of language to undo what language has done.”

But language is also referential. Words mean. As Auden again reminds us, “the sound of words is inseparable from their meaning. The notes in music do not denote anything.”

And so writing is always writing about. One never gets past ideas about the thing to the thing itself. So there remains that lingering question of what to write about.
“I know that the only subject for a philosopher and for a poet is the verb ‘to be.’”
Czesław Miłosz, letter to Thomas Merton, 5 Oct. 1961

When we read *Hamlet*, the question of “to be or not to be” is the question of suicide. But what Miłosz means, and what the poets and philosophers mean, I suspect, is “how” to be. How to continue “to be” when we know that the “not to be” waits for us somewhere ahead. Montaigne says that philosophy is the process of learning how to die. Poetry is the same education, set to music.

When you write, you must be and not be at the same time. Right now it is harder “not to be.” Later, when only your writing remains of you, it will be far too easy.

“And the secret of human life, the universal secret, the root secret from which all other secrets spring, is the longing for more life, the furious and insatiable desire to be everything else without ever ceasing to be ourselves, to take possession of the entire universe without letting the universe take possession of us and absorb us; it is the desire to be someone else without ceasing to be myself, and continue being myself at the same time I am someone else; it is, in a word, the appetite for divinity, the hunger for God.”

--Miguel de Unamuno, “The Secret of Life”

This secret, this need sleeps within us all, but in the artist it is awake, and unavoidable, and beautiful.
We can be only one person. We can truly know only ourselves, and that’s probably impossible in its own right. So the famous advice Sherwood Anderson offered to William Faulkner—“Write what you know”—is both the best and worst writing advice ever given. Because you must write what you don’t know in order to try to know it. Just as you must show and tell at the same time. You must both be and not be so that the work—the essay, the story, the poem—can come into being.

We believe we cannot know something until we have experienced it. But experience is not merely a matter of what happens to us. “One’s real life,” writes Oscar Wilde, “is so often the life that one does not lead.” There is no difference between your “work” and your “real life.”

What does it mean to work? Here is your noun and your verb, the noun you worry over and discuss and revile when it is not the verb you are acting at the moment. How does one work? Constantly. The work is not all in the writing. The work is in your attention. Your attention and your imagination is your true experience.

Salman Rushdie on Charles Dickens: “There’s nothing of life that is not interesting to him.”
When I hear that phrase, I think of Annie Dillard, and specifically of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, the most instructive book I know about what it means to be an artist. What it means is to look, listen, smell, hear, touch, taste and most of all, to think. To have it at first-hand but also to do your homework, to check your facts.

“When her doctor took off her bandages and led her into the garden, the girl who was no longer blind saw ‘the tree with the lights in it.’ It was for this tree I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I’m still spending the power. Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck. I have since only very rarely seen the tree with the lights in it. The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains crack open and a new light roars in spate through the crack and the mountains slam.”

There is nothing that cannot be your subject. And even nothing is something. Cultivate an omnivorous mind, a tireless mind, an appetite for everything. The willingness to say ‘yes’ to the world in the hope that the world will, in turn, say yes to us.

The writing process according to Muriel Rukeyser: “Always a no the first time and then after a long, long time, a yes.”
And the world? “The world,” writes Ludwig Wittgenstein, “is everything that is the case.”

Philosophers.

But you have only so much time. Read everything, you’ve been told, and that’s true, but impossible. You can read, you can see and hear only so much. And of course you have to eat and sleep and make money and go to open mics and stay up late. So, the question of canons.

Too many writers from too many backgrounds have been excluded from “the canon” for far too long. As a result, the whole idea of “the” or even “a” canon is no longer popular, or in some quarters, even considered viable. And, if the canon means only the Great Books as determined by this committee or that, then good riddance.

But canons exist because of the economics of reading and of time. Time is your resource, and the economics are about the decisions we make given a scarcity of resources. And in such an economy, every writer I know keeps his or her own canon like a secret shrine. These are not the Great Books but your Great Books: though they may appear as monuments, they are just as much in flux as Nelson’s and Heraclitus’ river, just as much in flux as you and I ourselves are.
“*Your classic author,*” says Italo Calvino, “is the one you cannot feel indifferent to, who helps you to define yourself in relation to him, even in dispute with him.”

Your classic authors—and by now you know who they are, or at least some of them—come down from your shelf again and again like Moses from Sinai; their words are the laws you follow dutifully or reject outright, but by which you live, either way.

Your classic authors are those in whose or against whose images you make yourself; they are the tradition you obtain “by great labour” and, as Jorge Luis Borges says, they are the tradition you create *post hoc* as you write your own work.

That said, a bit of personal advice: you can spend too much time reading the living. You can never spend too much time reading the dead.

“Go down below and love, / if love you must—love the dead!” Creon tells Antigone. The writer must do this every working day. The bodies of our saints are a different kind of corpus; their bodies are always uncorrupted.
Youth is wasted on the young, eternity on the dead.

When I was young I liked art that told me life and the world were essentially simple. I wanted to be assured that art offered a solution that I might potentially access, even if I didn't possess it at the time. When I was young I wanted to master the work of art, to read it, understand it, and put it on my shelf like a trophy.

Now I resent this kind of art because I know better, and I prefer art that treats life, the world, and its audience as the endless complexity all of it is. The works that are greatest to you are those you never master. You can put them on your shelf but you cannot keep them there. They find their way back to your desk, to your bedside. They trouble your dreams.

“The worst that being an artist could do to you would be that it would make you slightly unhappy constantly.”

J.D. Salinger
One of the best things it could do to you would be that it would bring you, and bring others, joy. But that joy comes not from the achievements of the self or its arrival at some version of celebrity or even at the idea of having a rapt audience of 70 young writers in a craft talk. Though that last part is nice, I admit. Alan Shapiro writes:

“I remember thinking in my teens and early twenties that if I could only publish a poem in a magazine, any magazine, I’d feel fulfilled and validated and wildly happy. And then I got my first publication. And I was happy for a day or so, until the bill arrived for the printing cost, and then I thought if I could only get a poem into a real journal, into a magazine that pays, I’d feel validated and happy, and when that happened, I began to feel the need to publish in *The Atlantic Monthly* or *The New Yorker*, a magazine that someone other than my fellow writers may have heard of, and eventually when that happened, I believed that only publishing a book with a reputable press would make me feel as if I’d earned the right to call myself a poet. And then I published a book, and the resounding silence and inattention of the world [. . .] made me feel that the only measure of my poetic worth would be to get a book reviewed somewhere by someone I didn’t know, someone who wasn’t related to me, and when that occurred, and pleased me, and the pleasure passed, I thought that only winning a big book award could quell this anxiety about my literary worth.”

The only thing that ever made me happy with my work, he continues, was doing the work.

In the true present tense—at our happiest—there is no self. If we are aware of our joy it is only in retrospect, for to be truly joyous is to be aware of nothing except being. For the writer, that being is often the being simultaneously within and without language that is the act of writing. We experience this as readers, as writers, but fleetingly, and we spend much of our time reading and writing chasing another instance of that experience. And then we must be satisfied in the chase, in the lack.
If “to want” is truly “to lack,” then one cannot want something one possesses. One cannot want the bite of food one holds in his mouth; he can only want the next bite or want the last bite back. This may be why the Buddhists advise us to rid ourselves of desire; desire poisons because it can never be fulfilled. The dream realized leads only to the next dream. The knowledge of ‘possession’ or of experience allows us to relax the wanting of the thing we possess. We can appreciate a lover, love the lover, but we cannot want the lover. No wonder we look at our own writing with a mix of desire and disdain.

When writers understand this, we call them wonderful psychologists. They know and have always known that it’s called longing because it doesn’t go away.

Benjamin Paloff again: “Poetry, like religion, is not intended to provide comfort of any kind. On the contrary, poetry, like religion, amplifies our humanity specifically through its confrontation with uncertainty.”

What, then, is the role of the poet?

—To say what is beautiful when no one, not even he himself, believes it. In the words of Adam Zagajewski, to “Try to praise the mutilated world.”
One need not write poems about the world to write poems in praise of the world. The question is not a matter of subject, but a matter of ambition. “I see no reason,” says Donald Hall, “to spend your life writing poems unless your goal is to write great poems. [. . .] At sixteen the poet reads Whitman and Homer”—and let me add Sappho and Dickinson and Carson—“and wants to be immortal. Alas, at twenty-four the same poet wants to be in the New Yorker. [. . .] This is your contrary assignment: Be as good as George Herbert. Take as long as you wish.”

“Most contemporary verse is a poetry of asides, most modern poems could be in parentheses.” – Derek Walcott

We have come to distrust grand styles as embarrassing vestiges of grand narratives, of a pre-post-structuralist era when language was supposedly not in question. But language is always in question and has always been. That is exactly what makes the grandness of certain poets all the more desirable. They take the language we use to order pizza and renew it to the point where we fail to trust it. Very well then: distrust grand styles; distrust pleasure, too. But do not ignore them.

All good poets sing hymns.

Charles Wright

What he means is not that one need praise, but that one needs to write as if the dead and the Absolute were reading, and not just subscribers of The Threepenny Review.
That said, don’t forget the subscribers of *The Threepenny Review*.

A writer of such ambitions tends to fail. A writer of other ambitions tends to fail too. In the writing, in the revising, in the publishing, in the life.

Even the Almighty, in that old story, created the world twice. Even the Almighty suffered that awful need to be born.

All the greatest art is about failure. And all the failed art, by default, is too.

The work of art is a pilgrimage, and as with any true pilgrimage, one crawls the final mile.
“How many women,” says Cheryl Strayed in one of her best Dear Sugar articles on The Rumpus, “wrote beautiful novels and poems and plays and essays and scripts and songs in spite of all the crap they endured. How many of them didn’t collapse in a heap of ‘I could have been better than this’ and instead went right ahead and became better than anyone would have predicted or allowed them to be. The unifying theme is resilience and faith. The unifying theme is being a warrior and a motherfucker. It is not fragility. It’s strength. It’s nerve. And ‘if your Nerve, deny you—,’ as Emily Dickinson wrote, go above your Nerve.’ Writing is hard for every last one of us—straight white men included. Coal mining is harder. Do you think miners stand around all day talking about how hard it is to mine for coal? They do not. They simply dig. [. . .] So write. [. . .] Not like a girl. Not like a boy. Write like a motherfucker.”

None of us here can tell you that you are any good. No teacher, no publication, no prize or award, will ever convince you.

“I asked how can you ever be sure that what you write is really any good at all and he said you can’t you can’t you can never be sure you die without knowing whether anything you wrote was any good if you have to be sure don’t write”

W. S. Merwin, remembering John Berryman
Writers write, and they write, and they go on writing, in some cases long after wisdom and even common sense have told them to quit. There are always plenty of reasons—good compelling reasons too—for quitting, or for not writing very much or very seriously. (Writing is trouble, make no mistake, for everyone involved, and who needs trouble?) But once in a great while lightning strikes, and occasionally it strikes early in the writer's life. Sometimes it comes later, after years of work. And sometimes, most often, of course, it never happens at all. Strangely, it seems, it may hit people whose work you can't abide, an event that, when it occurs, causes you to feel there's no justice whatsoever in the world. (There isn't, more often than not.) It may hit the man or woman who is or was your friend, the one who drank too much, or not at all, who went off with someone's wife, or husband, or sister, after a party you attended together. The young writer who sat in the back of the class and never had anything to say about anything. The dunce, you thought. The writer who couldn't, not in one's wildest imaginings, make anyone's list of top ten possibilities. It happens sometimes. The dark horse. It happens, lightning, or it doesn't happen. (Naturally, it's more fun when it does happen.) But it will never, never happen to those who don't work hard at it and who don't consider the act of writing as very nearly the most important thing in their lives, right up there next to breath, and food, and shelter, and love, and God.

Raymond Carver, Introduction to Best American Short Stories 1986

“If we were not all fools we would never accomplish anything at all.”
   Thomas Merton, letter to Czesław Miłosz

There is no being a writer. There is only writing.
Notes


14. Benjamin Paloff, unpublished manuscript.


37. Benjamin Paloff, unpublished manuscript.


