

## Nuts and Bolts

One of the five straight branches of my hand  
Is lopt already; and the rest but stand  
Expecting when to fall: which soon will be;  
First dyes the Leafe, the Bough next, next the Tree.

That four-line *memento mori*, entitled “Upon the Losse of his Finger,” is by Robert Herrick, who lived from 1591 to 1674. Almost at once on first seeing it, I picked up the phone and read it to my friend Ray, who asked me for a recap with punctuation. We then spent a good fifteen minutes on the poem’s considerable metrical sophistication (about which more later).

I’m sure our neighbors—mine in Menlo Park, Ray’s in Redwood City—would have thought us a little eccentric: one for spending innumerable cocktail hours reading through Herrick’s fourteen-hundred poems, the other for interrupting a family cookout to spend a quarter hour on the niceties of classical metrics. But an extraordinary interest in the subject was business as usual in the English Department at nearby Stanford, where, classmates again eight years out of prep school, Ray and I had ended up in the doctoral program.

My first quarter included Old English, a course in bibliography and methods of graduate study, and an intensive introduction to the sixteenth century. As it happened, my undergraduate major had bridged English with French, and I had been saturated in the French poetry of the period, while my French had been kept alive by two years teaching it at Mount Hermon. When the time came in the sixteenth-century course for an extended project, a comparative treatment of some sort looked like a good bet. The teacher was Mr. Ryan, a newly tenured associate professor. I was able to sell him on a paper dealing with attempts by English poets to achieve in their translations and adaptations of French poems effects of rhythm and emphasis comparable to those in their models, a tricky task for the English poets given the radically different metrical schemes in the two languages.

Mr. Ryan, finding some of the paper’s argument mystifying, had gone with it to Mr. Winters for help in evaluating it. Mr. Winters read the paper and returned it with a note endorsing its conclusions. He had reservations about a couple of my metrical analyses but pronounced himself gratified to find a beginning graduate student who could handle meter with any competence at all. He added that I might find in his essay on “The Audible Reading of Poetry” some hints that would take me even further into the intricacies of meter. When I remarked to Mr. Ryan that I felt a little like Dr. Johnson’s dog walking on its hind legs, he said he felt the same way. Mr. Winters had recommended the essay to him, too.

The essay on the audible reading of poetry privileges, as nearly all of Mr. Winters writing does, the rhythms of a plain, unadorned, native or colloquial style adapted to the predominantly iambic meter of English verse. He believes that poets working in this mode brought technical savvy to a high pitch in the sixteenth century and that the seventeenth created a harvest for such poets as Ben Jonson,

John Donne (particularly in the Holy Sonnets, other devotional poems, and elegies and epistles) and George Herbert. Mr. Winters' student and protégé Wesley Trimpi, under whom I studied a good deal, spent more time than Winters on the rhetorical traditions of Continental humanists, who privileged genres of poetry that favored what the Romans called *sermo* or conversation: this would have included such forms as epigram, and, again, elegies and epistle. In both cases what was sought was a language, like that of Montaigne or Bacon in prose, that could sift down into the nooks and crannies of private mental experience.

I'll spare you the details of the essay on audible reading, but one feature deserves mention. Here is how Mr. Winters closes it:

There will never be a first-rate poet or a first-rate critic who lacks a first-rate ear; and no one will ever acquire a first-rate ear without working for it . .

.Poetry ... is an art... it is not a form of happy self-indulgence; and to master an art or even understand it, one has to labor with all one's mind and with at least a part of one's body.

I don't claim to have the ideal ear; but, with the help particularly of Mr. Trimpi and my friend Ray, and by listening to Mr. Winters read, I have worked at it, reading a lot of poems along the way. You will have to judge for yourselves how far I've come.

Mr. Winters championed lesser-known poets of the period. First among these would be of Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke. Born in 1554, the same year as Sidney, Greville survived his fellow favorite of Queen Elizabeth by forty-two years to die under Charles I in 1628. He served James I as Chancellor of the Exchequer, was knighted in 1603 and made Lord Brooke in 1621, by which time he had become one of the richest and most influential men in England. His poems and plays, highly regarded in his own time, suffered a near total eclipse until quite recently, only a few poems making it into the standard anthologies. Just as Surrey had been preferred to Wyatt by conventional scholarship, Sidney had been preferred to Greville. That is, until the nineteen fifties, when Dame Helen Gardner at Oxford and Mr. Winters urged, with slightly different emphases, a reappraisal. Dame Helen, coming more from the perspective of literary history, stressed the critique in his love poems of a Petrarchan sonnet tradition gone to seed and, in several religious poems, his embrace of a rigorous English Protestantism. While not ignoring these considerations, Mr. Winters concentrated on what he saw as a remarkable capacity to handle substantial thought in short poems couched in a distinctive poetic language at once powerful and terse, yet idiomatic—a precursor, in effect, to the best of Donne and Jonson and deserving to be thought their equal.

One poem of Greville some of you would probably recognize, since Aldous Huxley chose the first six lines as the epigraph for *Point Counter Point*. It is called "Chorus Sacerdotum" and is from *Mustapha*, a classical play not meant to be staged.

O wearisome condition of humanity!  
Born under one law, to another bound;  
Vainly begot and yet forbidden vanity;  
Created sick, commanded to be sound.  
What meaneth nature by these diverse laws?  
Passion and reason, self-division cause.

The rest of the poem is mostly given to concrete instances of this ultimate crunch, such as this:

For how should man think that he may not do,  
If nature did not fail and punish, too?  
Tyrant to others, to herself unjust,  
Only commands things difficult and hard,  
Forbids us all things which it knows is lust,  
Makes easy pains, impossible reward.

It ends:

Yet when each of us in his own heart looks  
He finds the God there, far unlike his books.

To undergird the English Church and to circumscribe the behavior of its adherents, Elizabeth underwrote Richard Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, that great Protestant appropriation of Aristotle and Aquinas. We could say that here Greville gives us a compendium of that sprawling work rounded by the observation that in a fallen world, neither nature nor man lives up to the letter of those laws. That's a lot to pack into twenty-four lines

But I met an even better example of condensation in Professor Ryan's introduction to the sixteenth century, where, as in other Renaissance courses we were issued a supplementary fascicle with about thirty poems of Greville. This was before I had read a single word of Winters, but my undergraduate major had given me what was necessary to appreciate an astounding move. I had read *Paradise Lost* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the one with its hundreds of lines devoted to the torments of Hell, the other with its famous five line evocation by Mephistophilis:

Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.  
Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God,  
And tasted the eternal joys of Heaven,  
Am not tormented with ten thousand hells,  
In being depriv'd of everlasting bliss?  
(Ham is okay here. It's drama.)

The subject in both cases is the *poena damni*, or pain of privation, which entails consignment to a place where God is not, where there is thus no Creation or possibility of Heaven and the Beatific Vision, and where everything is defined, as in Milton's vivid picture, by its absence or perversion. I had a context, then, for the portrayal in "Down in the Depth of Mine Iniquity," of God "With glory scourging all the spir'its infernal,/ And uncreated hell with unprivation." There, in just two lines of grimly ironic inversion, we have the worst spiritual and intellectual torment of Hell definitively embodied.

All right, all right. Damnation is a little heavy for the Literary Club. Let me back off a bit and consider a sonnet from the Oxford side of the Greville revival. The poem itself may lend a little spice to the proceedings, as may a story that grows out of it. As with many sonnets of the day, the poem is known simply by its first line.

Caelica, I overnight was finely used,  
Lodged in the midst of paradise, your heart;  
Kind thoughts had charge I might not be refused,  
Of every fruit and flower I had part.

But curious knowledge, blown with busy flame,  
The sweetest fruits had in down shadows hidden,  
And for it found mine eyes had seen the same,  
I from my paradise was straight forbidden.

Where that cur, rumor, runs in every place,  
Barking with care, begotten out of fear;  
And glassy honor, tender of disgrace,  
Stands seraphim to see I come not there;  
While that fine soil which all these joys did yield,  
By broken fence is proved a common field.

You'd think the meaning of this poem blindingly obvious. That it was not to Dame Helen Gardner shows that scholarship is not without its entertaining moments. Professor Emeritus Ron Rebholz, then a young instructor who palled around with us grad students, had come straight from doing his D. Phil. with Dame Helen. An argument over the stakes in this poem had looked like costing him his mentor. What was at issue, the good Dame insisted, was some harmless favor—a kiss, perhaps—and not what appears clearly to be intended. In Victorian England, maybe, where a young woman's reputation could be compromised by merely "walking out" with a man. But in a Renaissance court, even that of the Virgin Queene? Ron was incredulous, the more so because this formidable scholar was no prude. She had not scrupled to argue that Thomas Nashe's notorious *Choise of Valentines*, deemed pornographic even in the nineteen fifties, would have been seen in its day as a harmless erotic fantasy, a stance that had drawn angry letters to the *Times*. In time Ron prevailed, but he took care to mend his fence by treating the good Dame to dinner at the Bell Hotel in Charlbury, the mention of which by my wife had prompted him to tell the story. When I met Ron several years later at the British Library, he told me he was still dining off the anecdote .

There was as well a poet whom Mr. Winters admired unreservedly as a contemporary defender in prose and exponent in verse of the Plain Style. This was J. V. Cunningham (1911-1985), who had earned a Ph. D. under Mr. Winters in 1945 and from 1953 was a professor at Brandeis, where he taught until his retirement in 1980. He was honored by the Academy of American Poets and the Guggenheim Foundation, among others. His poems, numbering only about two hundred are mostly epigrams or epigrammatic in expression and recall other classical forms such

as the epistle and elegy that last enjoyed wide acceptance in the seventeenth century. This distance from most other contemporary poetry limited his audience largely to fellow poets and academics interested in classical forms, a shame because he is eminently readable, as I learned from the several times he read at Stanford during my time there. One poem, at least, has found its way into major anthologies, and its tag line is occasionally repeated by people who may have no idea of its source. The poem is entitled "On Doctor Drink." (I should explain that "Doctor Drink" was the title of a very short volume of poems whose subject is self-explanatory.)

A reader (did he buy it, borrow, beg,  
Or read it in a bookstore on one leg?)  
Dislikes my book; calls it, to my discredit,  
A book you can't put down before you've read it.  
Yet in this paucity, this drouth of phrases,  
There are as many as in children phases:  
The trivial, vulgar, and exalted jostle  
Each other in a way to make the apostle  
Of culture and right feeling shudder faintly.  
It is a shudder that affects the saintly.  
It is a shudder by which I am faulted.  
I like the trivial, vulgar, and exalted.

And here are three illustrative epigrams.

I married in my youth a wife.  
She was my own, my very first.  
She gave the best years of her life.  
I hope nobody gets the worst.

*Lip* was a man who used his head.  
He used it when he went to bed  
With his friend's wife, and with his friend,  
With either sex, at either end.

Friend, on this scaffold Thomas More lies dead  
Who would not cut the Body from the Head.

An English critic has said of Cunningham that he is the best epigrammatist since Landor. Now, I'm aware that in this group of widely read men, many in the learned professions, there must be some who will say, "Who the hell is Landor?" And there will be others who will wonder that any literate person does not know him. Where anyone falls on that scale is his own business. If you don't know who Landor was, just be patient. You will meet him a little later and have the chance to decide if you want to read more of him.

I have thrown Cunningham in here to refer to him later, but I might as well point out in passing that the phrase “the trivial, vulgar, and exalted” involves two successive caesuras after unstressed syllables, giving it exemplary emphasis whenever it occurs in an iambic line.

And with that observation, we may move on to a brief illustrative examination of the poem I quoted at the outset. If I ignore the punctuation and read only metrically, this is the result.

**One** of the **five** straight **branches** of my **hand**  
**Is lopt** already; **and** the **rest** but **stand**  
 Expecting **when** to **fall**: which **soon** will **be**;  
**First** dyes the **Leafe**, the **Bough** next, **next** the **Tree**.

That’s hash, at best. If I pay attention to the punctuation and the syntax, I might uncover a rhythmic variety that makes the poem more satisfying to the ear and more cogent. Let’s look at the signals.

The first line, “One of the five straight branches of my hand,” begins with a trochee or inverted foot and continues without punctuation until a semicolon after “Is lopt already.” This brings us to a strong caesura after the unstressed syllable of the third foot, made up of the ultra light final *y* of *already* and the very light “and” that follows.. The line continues “and the rest but stand.” But, since there is no end punctuation and since the syntax requires it, we tend not to stress “stand” at all heavily and continue the sentence with “Expecting when to fall,” where we encounter a colon that stops us firmly at the end of the third foot. “Which soon will be,” followed by a semicolon, firmly stops the line and prepares us for the logical conclusion of this one-sentence proposition. The final line, like the first, begins with an inverted foot, “**First** dyes,” followed by the iamb “the **Leafe**,” which is mildly stopped by a comma. That is, before a caesura after the second foot, we have **heavy**, lighter, lighter still, **heavy**, a pattern that gives great emphasis to “First” at one end and “Leafe” at the other. The final three feet are regular iambs: “the , **Bough**,” “next, **next**,” and “the **Tree**.” But the iambic rhythm is radically disrupted by a pause at the comma between the repetitions of “next,” leaving us with two units of three beats each rather than the expected three units of two beats each. Asymmetrically disposed with relation to the meter, the three main syntactical and rhythmic units of the line progress in order of importance to the meaning of the sentence. The result is a line that builds to a sobering climax on “Tree” that will emerge almost as a shout even if I read it not as an actor might, but with very little change in volume.

Bear with me one more time and try to hear the subtle departures from strict iambic rhythm that give the poem its emphasis on mortality.

One of the five straight branches of my hand  
 Is lopt already; and the rest but stand  
 Expecting when to fall: which soon will be;  
 First dyes the Leafe, the Bough next, next the Tree.

Here is better known Herrick poem, found in nearly every anthology. It is called "Upon Julia's Clothes."

When as in silks my Julia goes,  
Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flowes  
That liquefaction of her clothes.

Next, when I cast mine eyes and see  
That brave vibration, each way free;  
O how that glittering taketh me!

Don't worry. I'm not going to work over its meter. I've only introduced this piece as a nod to the Club's nascent piscatory tradition. Liquefaction is nice, though, isn't it?

Now, if you say that a concentration on the fine points of audible performance will take a reader only so far in understanding the whole meaning of a poem, you are of course right. Clearly, there are other barriers to be overcome, more work to be done, in cases where a reader suspects there may be in a poem a core of intellectual or aesthetic satisfaction worth more effort. For two instances close to Fourth Street, let me take Fred McGavran, who has been reading poems of Donne and Herbert to audiences in Episcopal homes for the elderly.

Last November Fred was puzzled by the line in "The Thanksgiving" by Herbert that includes the clause "if I survive, I'll build a little *spittle*," spelled as if to signify something drooled. Not having an *OED* handy, Fred emailed me. I shot back that in Herbert's time the word, more often spelled *spittal*, was short for *hospital*, meaning, in this context, something more like a hostel or shelter for the temporarily indigent or itinerant. In the poem, the building of such a shelter is one of many acts of charity the speaker says he might undertake by way of thanks for his share of God's love. Because knowing this bit of specialized lore impressed Fred, he came back to me in December with another conundrum. The email in full is, "Ducky, what is your reading of 'brutish is thy right?' Without a context, that was a conundrum for me, too. But I quickly tracked down the source, Herbert's "Christmas," where there is the line "Since my dark soul and brutish is thy right." The issue here is simultaneously metrical and syntactical. "Since my dark and brutish soul is thy right," which is what Herbert means, does not scan; "Since my dark soul and brutish is thy right" does scan. Milton uses the same caper in the famous sonnet on his blindness: "Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide." I got this answer back to Fred before he could send another email with the context, which made him think I must have Herbert by heart. The truth is that I searched the phrase on the web and got lucky. I'll take credit, though, for the answer. These are things I ought to know after so many years of teaching the poetry of Herbert's time. Now, though, Fred has backed me into a corner. He tells people, in my presence, that I'm a miraculous source of arcane lore, yet he tells **me** shamelessly that picking my brain is easier than looking things up. Translation: he knows that the next time he asks me a question I'll bust my ass to find an answer or risk losing a reputation for infallibility.

Obviously, for readers who would do more homework to get more out of poems they think would reward the effort, there are many places to go: friends and fellow readers; the *OED* for words that are unfamiliar or whose meanings might have shifted; teachers or others with specialized knowledge; articles and books, both historical and critical; the web sites of the Poetry Foundation or The Poem Hunter, which have excellent biographies, bibliographies, and in the case of some poems, analyses; a reliable edition with good notes helps . . . the list is nearly endless.

Mr. Winters, elsewhere in his writing, and constantly in his teaching, urged serious readers of poems to exploit of all possible resources in doing justice to what poets have put into them. For those who would be writers, teachers, or critics of poetry—and especially for those who would be all three, he proposed an uncompromising discipline: first, they must acquire a thorough knowledge of the received traditions of English poetry, at least from the Renaissance on; hardly less important, they must attain a thorough understanding of how, in successive periods, that poetry has been produced, circulated, and assessed; and, finally, they must be conversant with the ways the poetry of any era has participated in the conversations important to its surrounding culture. How otherwise, he thought, to judge what is worth attention, emulation, propagation, and preservation?

Mr. Winters himself came as close to meeting that standard as anyone in my experience. It was pretty well impossible to catch him out on the work of any significant poet in the canon, not to mention more obscure favorites of his such as the English satirist Charles Churchill (1731-64) or the American Adelaide Crapsey (1878-1914). He had the goods, even on that large body of work he thought second rate or worse.

As the designated gray eminence of the English department, Mr. Winters was widely perceived as austere and distant. Nevertheless, in reading and commenting on my fledgling effort for Professor Ryan, he had dropped his own work to help a junior colleague and an unknown student—and that at the end of term, any English teacher's most hectic time. I did not actually meet Mr. Winters until my third year, although I read several more of his critical essays and learned a good deal about him from Ray and others of his students as well from working with Wesley Trimpi, who was on intimate terms with him. All agreed that with them he was unsparing of his time and attention. And I did witness one episode of exemplary generosity to a complete stranger.

While it is clear that Mr. Winters was aggrieved, even embittered, by the struggles of his own earlier career, it is also true that those battles appear to have made him sympathetic to anyone abused by academic bullying grounded in ignorance, misunderstanding, or mere inattention. In the fall of 1962, the department was treated to a stunning Winters riposte to an egregious, mindless attack on a visiting scholar.

For that school year, Stanford had bestowed a visiting professorship in English on Irving Howe. A literary and social critic, lead writer for *Commentary* and the *National Review*, co-founder and editor of *Dissent*, Howe was then teaching at Brandeis. Brought up in the tradition of hard-hitting left-wing polemics, he was not suited by the moderate politics and somewhat genteel collegiality of the local professoriate, and he lost no opportunity to shake things up, more often than not



with calculated rudeness. On the day I'm speaking of, the English faculty had been invited to hear a presentation by an assistant professor from Rutgers under consideration for a job at Stanford. Graduate students were encouraged to attend such sessions so we could see what might confront any of us down the line. Moreover, several of us had met the visitor earlier in the day when he had been escorted on a tour of the offices where the teaching assistants and younger professors were quartered.

The candidate had been asked to tell us about a forthcoming book largely based on his Princeton dissertation. The talk progressed from a detailed description of the English popular theater in the early nineteenth century to an equally detailed account of the way many of that theater's practices and conventions informed the fiction of Thackeray, Dickens, and Willkie Collins. Almost before the polite applause had subsided, Howe began a loud, rambling fulmination against the kind of useless investigation of peripheral figures to which he claimed we had just been subjected. The popular theater wasn't worth a book unless it could be connected with the work of major writers. As Howe continued working himself into a righteous lather, Mr. Winters fixed him with a stony stare and, taking advantage of a pause for breath, quietly observed that Howe was out of order and wondered how much of the lecture he had slept through. There followed an elegant epitome of the candidate's argument. I say "elegant" because it took no more than four or five minutes yet managed to capture perfectly the several ways in which the talk had in fact shown how at least three major authors had salted their work with routines straight out of the popular theater, a practice that cannot have hurt them in appealing to a popular audience. Howe said nothing. There were no further questions. The chairman thanked the candidate for his presentation, and we all filed out, not a few of us glad to see Howe discomfited for once.

Later, at the beginning of my third year of teaching at Wisconsin, that same young scholar, hired away from Dartmouth as an associate professor, moved into the office across the hall from mine. I stuck my head in to welcome him, addressing him as Professor Meisel.

"Call me Marty," he said. "Come on in. Wait! Haven't we . . .? Stanford, right?"

"Yes."

"Yvor Winters is a mensch."

Meanwhile, back to the Farm, as Stanford is known locally, at the beginning of my third year there. Encouraged by Ray and Mr. Trimpi, I wanted to audit Mr. Winters' undergraduate course in English lyric poetry. This class was routinely booked to capacity, and neither the Bursar nor Mr. Winters was known to be keen on auditors, financial and intellectual freeloaders that they are. Still, it was worth a shot. So, well before registration for the quarter in question, I sought Mr. Winters in his office.

Before I could introduce myself, he greeted me warmly by name and, on hearing why I'd come, invited me to have a seat. Peering over his glasses, resembling nothing so much as a genial owl, he recalled my paper for Professor Ryan and added that he had heard good things about my work from Professor Trimpi. I was floored. These guys really were keeping tabs on us grad students. There followed a sort of catechism, Mr. Winters naming a poem by the likes of Jonson, Donne, or Herbert and

asking me to discuss particularly tricky bits. Scary? You bet. I wish I could remember precisely what went down, but I don't. What remains is a sense that what had begun as a grilling somehow turned into the two of us simply trading quotations and capping verses for the pleasure of it. After a few minutes of this, Mr. Winters looked at his watch, reached for his brown bag and thermos, and announced that he was late for his usual lunch with Professor Merritt. Levering himself out of his Morris chair, he added, in his usual incantatory mode, "I shall expect you to be faithful in your attendance. It would look bad for both of us if you were not."

The course itself could fairly be called a *trip*, a word just coming into use among Stanford students in those early days of psychedelic experiments.

For all that he despised actors, Mr. Winters was in many ways a shameless ham. He delighted in outrageous claims, delivered always with question-begging certitude.

"Donne never outgrew an adolescent fascination with sex."

"Milton had a second-class mind."

He proceeded by a series of touchstones, such as the Greville poems I've mentioned, or the grittier Shakespeare sonnets, or the cerebral poems of Donne and Jonson he preferred. He could read better than anyone I've ever heard, but he would sometimes do so in a wholly perverse way. I recall his reading of the long passage in Milton's "Lycidas" that ends with the famous lines

Look homeward Angel, now, and melt with ruth,  
And, O, ye Dolphins, waft the hapless youth.

He did this so movingly that there was hardly a dry eye in the house. Then he stopped and said, "Noise, ladies and gentlemen, sheer, empty noise." He knew there was great emotional effect in the rhythm, but he thought, clearly, that there was too much laid on there with a Baroque trowel with which he had zero sympathy.

He had touchstones: in Wordsworth, prefer "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Peel Castle" to "Ode: Intimations of Immortality." The former he thought a moving memorial to a friend lost at sea, the latter a piece of confused, sentimental cultural primitivism. While he had reservations about "Lines Composed a few Miles above Tintern Abbey" as smacking too much of "powerful emotion recollected in tranquility," he respected the technical mastery reflected in Wordsworth's claim that he had composed the whole hundred-sixty lines of blank verse in his head while riding in a carriage and written them down upon descending. He respected the Wordsworth sonnets, as one would expect, because they were terse, plain, and competent. He admired Coleridge, especially the so-called conversations poems because of their unpretentious ease and, again, technical mastery. But in some ways, he preferred to both of them Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864), as unfashionable in his day as J. V. Cunningham in ours. Landor, in life a famously irascible man in trouble throughout his life for outbursts of temper, is a classical outlier among the Romantics. Here is the Winters favorite among his epigrams.

On Seeing a Hair of Lucretia Borgia

Borgia, thou once wert almost too august  
 And high for adoration—now thou’rt dust;  
 All that remains of thee these plaits enfold,  
 Calm hair, meandering with pellucid gold!

After reading the poem, Mr. Winters just let silence hang over the room for about thirty seconds, mouth slightly open, staring over our heads as if enraptured. He offered only that the last line was compelling beyond analysis, its rhythm mysteriously reinforcing our complex feelings about the fragility of life and the fleetingness of power and reputation, to say nothing of our response to a beautiful image. He said nothing about a possible objection I was wrestling with when I took the poem home.

Poets are supposed to show, not tell. “Meandering” and “pellucid” are just adjectives. Well, yes; but what adjectives they are became clear to me when I saw my wife with the afternoon sunlight falling on her gold-blond hair, worn in a braid. The hair in the poem is in “plaits,” that is, braided. “Meandering” is keenly observed not simply because it means “convoluted.” The pigment in blond hair is not uniform (unless it comes from a bottle). The color varies randomly in hue and intensity, which is to say that it meanders. “Pellucid” works, too. In the sharp, slanting light, the gold edges of Sallie’s braid were translucent, just as advertized. And then there’s *gold*, the name of a prized, perdurable substance and thus a word freighted with connotations of value. In outlasting Borgia, the hair, which shares the precious metal’s color, has some portion as well of its staying power and may even borrow some of its suggestion of worth. Gilt by association.

It is not true, by the way, that nothing remains of Lucretia but the hair that is said to *enfold* her in its plaits. What’s that tag? “Not marble, nor the gilded monuments/ Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme.” She is now available for further veneration wherever this poem finds a reader.

The epigram as a whole is quite varied in rhythm. The inverted first feet in lines one, three and four help to highlight the important words *Borgia*, *All*, and *Calm*. In the run-on second line, the strong caesura after the unstressed last syllable of *adoration* interrupts the third foot and lends emphasis to *now* without requiring readers to increase their volume unduly and break the mood. The first three feet of the third line move very lightly and quickly: *All that remains of thee*. The syntax requires a slight pause after this introductory phrase, which is followed by the heavier and slower *these plaits enfold*. *Calm hair* at the beginning of the final line slows us down even more. Partly because it is a long word implying leisurely progress, *meandering* slows us yet again; and I think readers will linger, too, because the word is unexpected and, like Herrick’s *liquefaction*, so perfectly apt. In any event, Landor has helped us apply the brakes progressively until we come to rest on final association of Lucretia with the value-rich *pellucid gold*.

There were other favorites of the sort one might expect given Mr. Winters prejudices, Thomas Hardy and Emily Dickinson being prime examples. Both are plain in diction and given to great compression of thought. In Hardy he admired

especially these lines from “Neutral Tones,” a poem about the final moments of a relationship on the rocks:

The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing  
Alive enough to have strength to die;

Can any of us imagine a more marginal vitality than that?

In the interest of time, let me leave the characterization of this course to someone who can do a much better job on it than I can.

About a year before I audited the course, I got to know Bob, who, of all the students I knew, was to reap the greatest harvest of Mr. Winters’ personal time and attention. I was to see a good deal of Bob in the two years and more that we overlapped, and we were to talk a great deal about poetry, which in his case developed with surprising speed from a vague interest into a calling.

Our first conversation took place when we had just come from a class on Johnson and Boswell with a notoriously acerbic professor who delighted in savage put-downs, which he justified as salutary for persons who later would face their share of academic catfights. Seeing several of us with previous experience of this teacher manage spirited exchanges with him, Bob had been frustrated by an absolute failure to get more out of him than perfunctory, dismissive responses to questions he thought were perfectly reasonable. He said this was just one of many experiences that had made him feel that a Jewish kid from the Jersey Shore and Rutgers was out of place in the more scholarly-genteel atmosphere that then obtained at Stanford. (Maybe Irving Howe had a point?) I tried to reassure him that his fellow students appreciated his obvious intelligence and mordant wit and that no one undervalued his preparation at Rutgers, where it was known that he had enjoyed privileged relations with two redoubtable literary figures, Francis Fergusson and Paul Fussell. Finally, tired of his flaunting the Jersey chip on his shoulder, I asked if he didn’t actually aspire to join the academic establishment he thought scorned him and that he professed to scorn. I was sorry at once but needn’t have been. After a brief pause, he laughed and said, “Shit! Maybe you’re right.” We got on just fine from then on.

It soon appeared that Bob had expressed similar misgivings to several other students and to, Mr. Winters, whom he found sympathetic on the personal side, sharply critical but willing to help on the professional. Bob had gone to Mr. Winters to talk about writing poetry and to get a response to several efforts. These Mr. Winters had found to be almost hopeless, and he asked Bob if he had any equipment for writing poems beside a vague desire to do so. Had he read much poetry, let alone read it with an eye to learning how it was made? He had not. Was he willing to learn? He was. Something about Bob’s—his determination, his fierce intelligence, perhaps—must have struck Mr. Winters for, after only two or three meetings, he arranged to set up a “directed reading” with Bob for the next two terms. That is, he would give Bob the kind of attention that would qualify with both the English department and the university’s Bursar as a course for full credit duly paid for out of Bob’s scholarship.

Skip forward till near the end of Bob's one-man seminar in poetry. One day, I came upon a group of seven or eight students clustered around Bob, who had convulsed them with an epigram composed during a seminar they had just left. Pressed—none too hard—he recited it for me. I laughed too. Bob, by then admitted as a sort of probationer to the poetry-writing program, decided to ask Mr. Winters to read this four-line poem in class. What happened next I later heard from Ray and later confirmed with the perpetrator.

As Mr. Winters was looking over the text, Bob asked him to please pay particular attention to the comma after the word "that" in the second line. This provoked a rejoinder that was all over the department within hours: "Mr. Pinsky. You may count on my reading; I rely on your punctuation." Translation: "I know my trade. If you put all the signals in the right places, my reading will do justice to your text." Here's the four-line poem, which I'm told Mr. Winters read with a straight face:

Gentlemen: may we go so far  
As to assume that, as to shit,  
The lecture room, though full of it,  
Cannot surpass the seminar.

Mr. Winters regarded four-letter words as a cheap play for attention. When faced with them, he often cited Wallace Stegner's essay "Goodbye to all T\_ \_ t." In this one-page throwaway, Stegner explains how he handles such cases. He had an uncle in his youth who was notorious in their small North Dakota community for the variety and volume of his tabooed expletives, and for the hair trigger that made them available at the least provocation. That is, until the day he lost two fingers to the buzz saw. Calmly looking at his mangled hand, he simply said, "Pshaw!" "Now there," Stegner deadpans, "was a man who knew something about emphasis.

Knowing this, and having just heard the put-down over the comma, the group expected Mr. to lower the boom on a hapless Bob. Instead, Mr. Winters merely observed with a smile that Bob appeared to have learned something from his directed immersion in well-made verse and invited him to come to all future meetings of the discussion group.

It's not hard to see why Mr. Winters would approve a technical tour de force that incorporates as well fidelity to experience, however trivial it might at first appear. Metrical sophistication appears no later than the first two feet. The first, *Gentle*, is inverted. The two syllables of the second foot, *men May*, are separated by a colon. A reader might not be sure at this point just what's up, but by the end of the first line it should be clear that we're dealing with nothing more anomalous than an iambic line with an inverted first foot and a strong caesura after the un-accented syllable of the second. Since the first line is not end-stopped, the sense requires the reader to move right along up to the comma that so concerned Bob in his gratuitous instruction to Mr. Winters. That caesura also breaks up a foot, *that as*, in the same way as *next next* in the Herrick finger poem. No singsong here, but a fruitful relationship between rhythmic variation and a firm iambic ground.

I suspect that Mr. Winters would have liked as well the internal rhymes on *assume* and *room*. Remember, the poem is written out as four lines of four feet each.

It could have been set out as two four-beat lines enclosing four two-beat lines, throwing *assume* and *room* into high relief. I think those rhymes are more satisfying when they sneak up on us and register retrospectively as almost incidental rather than archly contrived.

Finally, this epigram—trivial and vulgar, though hardly exalted—passes the Winters test of fidelity to experience. Like every rhetorical question, it is a statement travelling under false colors. May we go so far as to say that more of the commodity in question is likely to be generated when more than one person shares in its production? Of course, but not without risking complicity. Can anyone here who has been in a seminar of any sort answer other than *yes* to that question? Or can anyone who does answer *yes* guarantee he has never taken his shovel to a seminar? (And, yes, those questions too were rhetorical.)

Where is Horatio Alger when we need him? A first-year graduate student vaguely interested in writing poems lands for the rest of his Stanford years a Stegner Fellowship in creative writing. Degree in hand, he will first teach at Chicago (whose press will publish his doctoral thesis on Walter Savage Landor), then later at Wellesley, Berkeley, and Boston University. From 1997 to 2000, he will be the only person so far elected to be our Poet Laureate for three successive terms, immediately succeeding Robert Hass, who incidentally entered the Stanford creative writing program one year behind him. Some readers of contemporary poetry in the house may have seen that coming with the earlier mention of Bob's surname, for I am indeed speaking of the poet now normally known as *Robert Pinsky*. Others may at least have seen that name in the *New Yorker*, where he has appeared frequently over the years. Still others might have run across him on the web at *Slate*, where he regularly comments on poetry. As recently as the January issue of the *Smithsonian* magazine, the author of an article on Darwin's house outside London chose a poem of his as an epilogue.

In his earliest published work, Bob was already trying more adventurous variations within a regular meter, as here in "First Early Mornings Together."

Waking up over the candy store together  
 We hear the birds waking up below the sill  
 And slowly recognize ourselves, the weather,  
 The time, and the birds that rustle there until

Down to the street as fog and silence lift  
 The pigeons from the wrinkled awning flutter  
 To reconnoiter, mutter, stare and shift  
 Pecking by ones or twos the rainbowed gutter.

I've liked that poem since it appeared in Bob's first collection, published in 1975. I may even have seen it in Palo Alto. In any case, I was pleased and surprised to hear it on my car radio last October 10<sup>th</sup> read on NPR's *Writer's Almanac* by Garrison Keillor—while I was waiting at the Miami boathouse for a crew to arrive for practice. It was like meeting Bob nearly fifty years on.

We had in fact met face to face once in the interim. About twenty-five years along the way, it was in the late 'eighties, Bob was invited to read from his poems at Miami.

By this time, Bob, as Robert Pinsky, already had a pretty big reputation. Knowing that, I lay doggo with the organizer of the reading, who apparently did not realize that we had overlapped in graduate school. If Bob chose to remember me, fine; if not, fine.

My wife and I went to the reading, seated in about the sixth row from the stage. As Bob was just about to take his seat to await his formal introduction, he noticed us.

“Duck. Sallie. I didn’t know you were at Miami. Let’s talk.”

You know what happened. The organizer’s plans for a post-talk beer session in uptown Oxford suffered a monkey wrench. We had perforce to be included, which led Bob’s insistence that we sit next to him. There ensued a Winters nostalgia fest—capped verses, recollection on recollection, touchstone on touchstone. When I said I remembered the seminar poem, which had not appeared in any of his collections, he was incredulous, and said he didn’t mind my sharing it. He had excluded it from his published collections but remembered it fondly. He was willing to bet I couldn’t do it. He lost.

After about twenty minutes, Sallie poked me under the table, and I suggested to Bob that we ought to let him socialize with the five or six others the organizer had brought along. At this, Bob surprised me by saying he wanted to continue our discussion, focusing on a handful of particular poems that we admired in common as a result of our mutual exposure to a great, if eccentric teacher. Having just taken over a poetry program of his own at Boston University, he wanted to know how I handled several poems in my field, so we went on for another fifteen or twenty minutes, Bob having alerted the others at the table that he wanted to discuss nuts and bolts with someone who shared his enthusiasm for them. That discussion remains among the most intellectually refreshing I’ve ever had. We hauled out several pieces each by Jonson, Donne, Herbert, and Greville. We voyaged a little beyond my period to touch on Landor and Cunningham. Every poem we discussed eventually ended up finding its way into the commentaries that Bob has for several years since done as poetry editor of the web magazine *Slate*. The Winters canon goes digital.

What Bob thought of his experience with Mr. Winters at this point in his own career can best be gleaned from a section of his long poem, “An Essay on Psychiatrists.” Bob’s wife, Ellen, is a psychotherapist. The poem, which takes off from a reading of *The Bacchae*, is a rumination on the attempt of poets to grapple with the most powerful forces of the human mind and heart without themselves going mad. The view offered by Mr. Winters in his course is one pole of the argument. Here’s Bob’s take on the course:

*XX. Peroration, Concerning Genius*

As to my own concerns, it seems odd, given  
The ideas many of us have about art,

That so many writers, makers of films,

Artists, all suitors of excellence and their own  
Genius, should consult psychiatrists, willing  
To risk that the doctor in curing

The sickness should smooth away the cicatrice  
Of genius, too. But it is all bosh, the false  
Link between genius and sickness,

Except perhaps as they were linked  
By the Old Man, addressing his class  
On the first day: *"I know why you are here.*

*You are here to laugh. You have heard of a crazy  
Old man who believes that Robert Bridges  
Was a good poet; who believes that Fulke*

*Greville was a great poet, greater than Philip  
Sidney; who believes that Shakespeare's Sonnets  
Are not all that they are cracked up to be .... Well,*

*I will tell you something: I will tell you  
What this course is about. Sometime in the middle  
Of the Eighteenth Century, along with the rise*

*Of capitalism and scientific method, the logical  
Foundations of Western thought decayed and fell apart.  
When they fell apart, poets were left*

*With emotions and experiences, and with no way  
To examine them. At this time, poets and men  
Of genius began to go mad. Gray went mad. Collins*

*Went mad. Kit Smart was mad. William Blake surely  
Was a madman. Coleridge was a drug addict, with severe  
Depression. My friend Hart Crane died mad. My friend*

*Ezra Pound is mad. But you will not go mad; you will grow up  
To become happy, sentimental old college professors,  
Because they were men of genius, and you*

*Are not; and the ideas which were vital  
To them are mere amusement to you. I will not  
Go mad, because I have understood those ideas ...."*



He drank wine and smoked his pipe more than he should;  
 In the end his doctors in order to prolong life  
 Were forced to cut away most of his tongue.

That was their business. As far as he was concerned  
 Suffering was life's penalty; wisdom armed one  
 Against madness; speech was temporary; poetry was truth.

A modified version of this view of Winters emerges from the commencement address Bob gave at Stanford in 1999, during his record tenure as Poet Laureate. He exhorts the graduates to preserve and transmit our ancestral cultural treasures yet at the same time not to neglect America's vibrant popular culture. But when he speaks of popular culture, he does not mean mass culture. The Stanford graduates at the beginning of the twenty-first century he sees as inoculated against pervasive mass culture by "an admirable, droll skepticism." Thus armed, they resist being "too easily sold or too easily sold to." He continues:

In a way, as a generation, you have reversed the lines I recall from my beloved great teacher here at Stanford, Yvor Winters.

Winters wrote this quatrain in a poem called "On Teaching the Young":

*The young are quick of speech.  
 Grown middle-aged, I teach  
 Corrosion and distrust  
 Exacting what I must.*

I hope your corrosion and distrust carry you far, and that your resistance and skepticism not prevent you from picking and choosing and walking among the great dead . . .

Bob clearly does not think that capitalism and the scientific method have destroyed the foundations of Western society, as Winters feared. Nor does he see any reason for poets to go mad when they try today, as they have for ages, to grapple with the problems of existence. Instead, like many other contemporary poets, he forges ahead, finding new modes. He has lately taken, for example, to experimenting with jazz. A musician able to play his sax with professionals, has written several poems that try to find ways to suggest jazz moves by verbal means, exploiting cadence, rhythm, pitch, volume, vowel sounds, or whatever else might work. In 2012 he collaborated with jazz pianist Laurence Hobgood on an album called PoemJazz in which verse—neither sung nor acted, but spoken—takes the part of a horn, responding to the piano's music. I have read some of the poems but not heard the album. I have enjoyed both, but they would likely be more accessible and pleasurable to Steve Marine, Robert Faaborg, or Mark Schlacter than to me, scarcely able as I am to tell a ruff from a vamp in their musical manifestation, let alone in a verbal echo. Once again, it's a question of taking from a poem what you're able to put into it.

Bob has worked tirelessly to make poetry accessible to a wider public without either condescending or dumbing it down. He has become an establishment

figure, but he is neither an elitist snob nor a fifth-columnist working within the system. He has given his life to poetry and would like to inspire readers and potential writers to join him in keeping it alive. As Poet Laureate he promoted a project called "America's Favorite Poems," which resulted in a book edited by him and Maggie Dietz that collects from thousands of letters solicited by the project several poems "to be read aloud and memorized, poems to be celebrated as part of our nation's cultural inheritance." The comments that accompany the poems, all by readers who are not professional critics, reveal that at the turn of the twenty-first century poetry was passionately alive and well in America.

In a new book to be published this summer, Bob continues the importance of individual readers that he addresses in another passage from the Stanford commencement address. There he says

poetry seeks to live on an individual human scale. The medium for a poem is one person's voice. So by the nature of the medium, it is a counterweight to mass art.

The new book, entitled "Singing School," takes its title from Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium": "Nor is there singing school but studying / Monuments of its own magnificence." The book focuses on 80 poems, ranging from Sappho through Herbert and Dickinson to Mina Loy. The prospectus says that the collection "proposes that attention to great poetry is the best path to fresher, more pleasurable reading." In it, we are told, introductions "practical, even technical approach: encouraging the reader to read poems with informed pleasure and a sharp interest in the craft." The standard of selection implied in the prospectus seems to echo Dr. Johnson's dictum that "Nothing can please many and please long but just representation of general nature."

*Ars longa, vita brevis.* A poem exists outside us as a text. The representation of experience latent in a poem comes alive only when it is read. And here is Bob, encouraging us to learn to read in much the way his teacher did, by reading a lot of good poetry. I'll buy that. In fact, my copy is on pre-order at Amazon right now.