

POETIC INQUIRY

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Poetic inquiry is name for a mode of thought and discovery that seeks to reveal and communicate truths via intuitive contemplation and creative expression. This intuitive / creative mode of knowledge production and way of being in the world was strongly advocated by diverse and important thinkers in the history of criticism and philosophy, including Ralph Waldo Emerson (who called it “American scholarship”) and Martin Heidegger. The process can be broken down into steps and taught to undergraduates via specific exercises of reading, writing, and questioning. When taught, it opens up complex fields of poetic thought and exploration for students. The fruit of poetic inquiry, as discussed by poets and philosophers of literature is understood to be symbols or images that embody a mysterious, yet evident quality that both Kant and Emerson referred to as “soul.” Poetic inquiry is a potentially revitalizing and galvanizing mode of thought for humanistic study and teaching, making available means of engaging with and producing texts that are both very fresh and steeped in poetic tradition. It provides a contemplative alternative to the highly problematic paradigm of objectivist scholarship that grew out of the worldview of 19th century reductive materialism and presently dominates the humanities.

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PREFACE

Who can doubt that poetry will revive and lead in a new age, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the polestar for a thousand years?

– *Emerson, “The American Scholar”*

The long way leading to the poetry is itself one that inquires poetically.

– *Heidegger commenting on Rilke, “What Are Poets For?”*

1.0 WHAT IS “POETIC INQUIRY”?

“Poetic inquiry” could be a term used to describe many kinds of thought and engagement. This dissertation doesn’t seek to offer an exhaustive exploration of the possible connotations of that term (though such an exploration could be valuable and exciting) but rather uses the term “poetic inquiry” as a name for specific processes of questioning and creating suggested by transcendentalist currents in nineteenth and twentieth century thought. This present work explores those currents in their wide-ranging manifestations (touching upon such varied and-yet-interrelated thinkers as Immanuel Kant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Martin Heidegger and Jane Hirshfield), and then goes on to explore my experiments with poetic inquiry (thus defined) as an avenue of literary education that offers an exciting alternative to presently dominant practices. Briefly put, I use “poetic inquiry” to describe a process of contemplative truth-seeking followed by the creative expression of those truths discovered.

By thus defining “poetic inquiry” I don’t seek to shut down other possible meanings of the term or to invalidate their importance; I simply wish to assign an appropriate name to an important and inadequately appreciated mode of knowledge generation. By giving a name to that mode of knowing, I’m able to highlight connections and similarities among thinkers often regarded to be disparate in concern (for example, Heidegger and Emerson).

Like philosophic and scientific inquiry, poetic inquiry in this sense seeks to discover and communicate truths. But while both philosophic and scientific inquiry deploy systematic and rational approaches to their projects and largely emphasize objectivity, poetic inquiry is nonsystematic and intuitive in its approach and emphasizes subjectivity rather than objectivity. In other words, poetic inquiry as I here define it attends primarily to the existential and subjective dimension of truth.¹

Expression in poetic inquiry is “creative” in at least two ways: first, it is creative for the one who writes it in that the very act of articulating something intuited during contemplative truth-seeking can have the effect of bringing that truth (understood as something multiple and plenteous in its manifestations, rather than as something limited or singular) into being, or *creating* it. In this sense we might say that poetic inquiry cannot only discover but can also “make” truths. “Making” is of course the original meaning of the Greek word, *poiēsis*, from which our English word “poetry” derives. In the context of poetic inquiry we would say that what poetry “makes” is the experience of extra-rational truth for both its writers and its readers. Secondly, expression in poetic inquiry is creative for the one who reads and receives it-- through the use of poetic strategies the fruit of poetic inquiry *creates* for the reader or audience an extra-

¹ There are figures who are hailed as philosophers—Nietzsche, Emerson, and Kierkegaard come prominently to mind—whose work may be said to rely more heavily on poetic strategy (gesture, fiction, drama, trope—see the discussion of these later in this dissertation) than on rational argument and who value existential and subjective truth. I would count these figures as poetic inquirers rather than philosophers.

rational experience of the author-inquirer's discovered truths (i.e., it does not communicate the discovered truths via rational argument or proof).

Because transcendentalist poetic inquiry is an essentially intuitive and extra-rational process, it resists being articulated in any systematic way. There are very many excellent examples of the fruit of poetic inquiry. There are far fewer excellent explanations of the process. I have attempted to articulate and champion the process of poetic inquiry in this prosaic dissertation form because I have desired to teach it to myself and to others, and because many people (including myself) resist doing something when they cannot understand just why and how it should be done. Thus the following work attempts to reasonably explain the detailed application and essential value of an endeavor which exceeds reason. I have sought to do this rather difficult task because I believe poetic inquiry to be very important work indeed, work which we have perhaps been neglecting for the very reason that it is difficult to rationally or systematically explain and justify.

1.1 POETIC INQUIRY AS A MODE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

In the mid-nineteenth century in New England, Ralph Waldo Emerson also sought to explain and articulate the value of the process that I am now calling poetic inquiry, and to tell how it should be done because he, too, wanted to teach it to himself and to others (he called the work American scholarship or “poetry”—see my subsequent discussion of his works “The American Scholar” and “The Poet” and their relation).

It could be argued that Emerson was massively successful in his project of studying and teaching poetic inquiry since he himself became very skilled at demonstrating it within his essays

and poems, and since he is also well-known to have directly inspired Walt Whitman (arguably one of the greatest poets the United States has yet produced) with his discussion of poetic inquiry in all of his essays, but most especially “The Poet.”

On the other hand, it could be argued that Emerson failed in his project of teaching poetic inquiry, since poetic inquiry did not become central to the practice of scholarship in America, as he expressed his hope that it would be in his address to the Phi Beta Kappa society at Harvard (“The American Scholar”).

Instead of being defined by poetic inquiry, scholarship in America came to be dominated by a paradigm that the educational theorist Parker Palmer has termed “objectivism.” Shortly, I will discuss how this dominance came to occur, but first I want to make clear just what objectivism is. I am grateful to Palmer for his lucid description of objectivism and its consequences in his 1998 work, *The Courage to Teach*. I here quote from Palmer at length, because I don’t think my summary or paraphrase could do justice to the precision of Palmer’s explanation of a phenomenon which is so pervasive as to be practically imperceptible to those of us immersed in it:

The mode of knowing that dominates education creates disconnections between teachers, their subjects, and their students because it is rooted in fear. This mode, called *objectivism*, portrays truth as something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the thing we want to know.

Why? Because if we get too close to it, the impure contents of our subjective lives will contaminate that thing and our knowledge of it. No matter what ‘it’ is—an episode in history, a creature from the wild, a passage in great

literature, or a phenomenon of human behavior—objectivism claims that we can know the things of the world truly and well only from afar.

For objectivism, the subjective self is the enemy most to be feared—a Pandora’s box of opinion, bias, and ignorance that will distort our knowledge once the lid flies open. We keep the lid shut by relying exclusively on reason and facts, logic and data that cannot be swayed by subjective desire (or so the theory goes). The role of the mind and the senses in this scheme is not to connect us to the world but to hold the world at bay, lest our knowledge of it be tainted.

In objectivism, subjectivity is feared not only because it contaminates things but because it creates relationships between those things and us—and relationships are contaminating as well. When a thing ceases to be an object and becomes a vital, interactive part of our lives—whether it is a work of art, an indigenous people, or an ecosystem—it might get a grip on us, biasing us toward it, thus threatening the purity of our knowledge once again.

So objectivism, driven by fear, keeps us from forging relationships with the things of the world. Its modus operandi is simple: when we distance ourselves from something, it becomes an object; when it becomes an object, it no longer has life; when it is lifeless, it cannot touch or transform us, so our knowledge of the thing remains pure.

For objectivism, any way of knowing that requires subjective involvement between the knower and the known is regarded as irrational, true feeling is dismissed as sentimental, the imagination is seen as chaotic and unruly, and storytelling is labeled as personal and pointless. (51-52 *The Courage to Teach*)

As I will show it, poetic inquiry is a mode of knowing which is dramatically contrary to objectivism: it relies on subjective, relational, and holistic perception and expression. Rather than creating disconnections, it creates or reveals connections (Shelley's "the before unapprehended relations of things").

Poetic inquiry did not become the primary mode of learning and knowing in American higher education subsequent to Emerson's promotion of it because Emerson failed to explain it well or because poetic inquiry was ever conclusively shown to be an invalid or unnecessary means of understanding and discovering. Rather, poetic inquiry, deeply tied to transcendentalist and idealist traditions of thought, was simply dismissed and unvalued by the materialist vogue which gripped the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and which persists to this day. The materialistic attitude is objectivist in orientation and privileges scientific inquiry as the most worthwhile means of discovery.

The cultural critic Charles Eisenstein has recently commented instructively in his book *The Ascent of Humanity* on the relationship of scientific inquiry as expressed in the Scientific Method to culturally contingent objectivist assumptions about the nature of reality:

At bottom, the Scientific Method assumes that there is an objective universe "out there" that we can query experimentally, thus ascertaining the truth or falsity of our theories. Without this assumption, indeed, the whole concept of a "fact" becomes elusive, perhaps even incoherent. (Significantly, the root of the word is the Latin *factio*, a making or a doing, hinting perhaps at a former ambiguity between existence and perception, being and doing; what is, and what is made. Perhaps facts, like artifacts and manufactures, are made by us.)

The universe "out there" is in principle unconnected to one or another observer; hence the replicability of scientific experiment. If you and I query the universe with an identical experiment, we arrive at an identical result. So blinded are we by our ontology that we see this not as an assumption, but a logical necessity. We can hardly imagine a cogent system of thought that doesn't embody objectivity. Neither can we imagine a system of thought that dispenses with determinism, which encodes the modern notion of causality. These we see as basic principles of logic, not the conditional cultural assumptions that they are.

The unfortunate fact that the whole of 20th century physics invalidates precisely these principles of objectivity and determinism has not yet sunk into our intuitions. The world-view of classical science I describe in this chapter, obsolete though it may be, still informs the dominant beliefs and intuitions of our culture. Science is a vast and elaborate articulation of the defining myth of our civilization: that we are discrete and separate selves, living in an objective universe of others. Science presupposes, embodies, and reinforces that myth, blinding us to other ways of thinking, living, and being.

(Eisenstein <<http://www.ascentofhumanity.com/chapter3-1.php>>)

Here Eisenstein begins to underline the way in which the scientific method of inquiry circularly supports the objectivist worldview. Elsewhere in his discussion of scientific inquiry and objectivism, Eisenstein highlights the ways in which scientific inquiry blinds itself to analysis of phenomena in which "the experimenter is an inseparable aspect." Poetic inquiry, on the other hand, acknowledges that the experimenter or inquirer is always herself an inseparable aspect of

the truth into which she seeks insight and does not enforce a subject-object relationship of knower and known.

Poetic inquiry, or American scholarship (as Emerson optimistically called it) received an enthusiastic and appreciative reception amidst the generalist college atmosphere of Harvard in 1837 where Emerson delivered “The American Scholar” as an address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society. But, as Robert D. Richardson relates in his intellectual biography, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, Emerson’s call for poetic inquiry to be undertaken as a primary means of study was a very radical call (261), and perhaps only heeded by himself a few other remarkable thinkers, including Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau. The students and faculty at Harvard in 1837 were not ready to fully embrace Emerson’s intuition that poetry could be the polestar of a new age and poetic inquiry the means of charting that star. In *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, Gerald Graff shows that the academic climate at Harvard at the time of Emerson’s address tended to regard the study of poetry as a kind of aid to rhetorical facility, grammatical analysis, and elocutionary polish. This attitude toward the place of poetry in higher education persisted as long as the college system itself did. Even after Emerson’s address the faculty and students at Harvard and similar colleges such as Yale and Cornell tended to consider the practice of poetry as a pleasant past time and not a means of deep and reliable insight. Emerson’s suggested methods of contemplative truth-seeking and poetic articulation were not adopted into the curriculum. This lack of adoption may have been due to the fact that poetic inquiry is by its very nature something that values the spontaneously revealed and freely available truths of the present, and thus tends to undermine institutional authority and hierarchy.

1.2 POETIC INQUIRY VS THE GERMAN UNIVERSITY MODEL

Rather than adopting poetic inquiry / American scholarship as its model for the future as Emerson suggested, higher education in the United States in the nineteenth century gradually moved to adopt scientific inquiry as supported by the German university structure as its ideal. In *Professing Literature*, Gerald Graff narrates how the German model of scientific inquiry came to dominate the study of literature in the early twentieth century and to subsequently shape the structure of university departments and reward systems ever after. Since this dissertation is concerned specifically with teaching, it's interesting for us to note that as Emerson imagined it, the performance of poetic inquiry / American scholarship is something which is inherently a teaching tool connected to the well-being of its audience. Emerson aptly observed that it's the poetic inquirer's duty to cheer, to raise, and to guide others by showing them "the facts amidst appearances" (52). Poetic inquiry is a mode of knowing undertaken so that its fruit may bring inspiration and joy to others. In this sense, every work of poetic inquiry is always a work of teaching, a labor of positively transforming self and others. Emerson and his friends Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman all serve as examples of persons who worked in the intimately inspirational and relational mode of poetic inquiry.

In contrast, the German-influenced mode of scientific inquiry which formed the basis of the modern university and came to dominate higher education in the United States did not imagine itself as having any duty to cheer or uplift its hearers. Of the German-style research professor, Graff writes:

The new academic professional thought of himself as an 'investigator' devoted to advancing the frontiers of knowledge through research, and his loyalties went to his 'field' rather than to the classroom dedication that had made the older type of

college teacher seem a mere schoolmaster. The prototype of the new professional was the German university professor in his lecture room or seminar, a man who supposedly transcended morality and ideology in his disinterested search for truth. The German professor, it was admiringly said, is 'not a teacher' at all 'in the English sense of the term; he is a specialist. He is not responsible for the success of his hearers. He is responsible only for the quality of his instruction. His duty begins and ends with himself.' 'His time is not wasted in cudgeling the wits of refractory or listless reciters.' (62 Graff)

Our lingering notion of the teacher in higher education as a person of specialized learning whose success within the university system depends almost entirely on her excellence as a researcher and very little on her ability to cheer and uplift her students comes directly from this German ideal of teacher-as-researcher which became widely popular in the United States after the generalist college declined. Increasingly, it's a vision of inquiry and teaching which is undesirable for literary studies because it has contributed to the creation of the present highly problematic and arguably exploitative situation in which literary studies programs in universities (usually contained within larger "language" departments like English, French or German) rely heavily on contingent and graduate student teachers who are paid sometimes less than minimum wage to teach classes. These contingent teachers are accorded far less institutional status, respect and support than their tenured and tenure-track peers whose research efforts are validated by the university and who fit the conventional model of teacher-as-researcher. This present situation of a handful of research professors being supported by a mass of underpaid contingent and graduate faculty is undesirable because it causes tension and dissatisfaction for all involved. In

“Discourse of the Firetenders,” a study concerning the situation of contingent faculty within a recent special issue of *College English* devoted to the topic, the problem is neatly summarized:

As definitions of tenure-line productivity have shifted within a tenure system that increasingly values funded research and other forms of scholarly and creative work more than teaching, the *instructional* mission has been redirected largely toward those off the tenure track. This phenomenon has resulted in the dependence of one faculty category or rank upon another in a complex social network ... However, within this well-established division of labor, contingent faculty are paid less, provided few if any protections, and offered a restricted set of tools with which to do their work. Functioning without institutional buy-in, or, locally, a collective bargaining unit, the non-tenure-line faculty in our study felt as constrained in their ability to argue for the value of their instruction as they felt vulnerable to criticism....

It might be said that departmental and programmatic operations depend increasingly on discrete division of labor and specialized roles, of which non-tenure-line teaching faculty are part. Having a group of non-tenure-line faculty who shoulder the burden of teaching allows tenure-line faculty to focus on other departments and programmatic activities, such as teaching capstone and graduate courses, directing theses, conducting research, and providing service to the university. Further, although advising remains a faculty responsibility in some locations, it is increasingly contracted to a sector of professional advisors, which suggests that the contingent faculty member is but one example of a general shift toward specialized workplace roles in university

settings. (437-438 Doe)

I wish to suggest that the symptoms of increasingly discrete specialization and deepening disempowerment and alienation of contingent faculty in university departments (including literature departments) are not aberrations but logical manifestations of the underlying ethos of objectivist materialism upon which the modern university was designed.

The secular ideal of higher education as embodied by the pervasive German university model of disinterested research is one in which the emotional, relational and spiritual interests of teachers and students are deliberately divorced from their studies in the name of objectivity. A recent movement toward contemplative practice and integration in higher education is seeking to address and heal the wounds engendered by this violent separation and compartmentalization of students' and teachers' holistic concerns. This movement is spear-headed by Parker Palmer and his colleague Arthur Zajonc. In their recent book, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal*, Palmer and Zajonc comment upon practical solutions to move higher education in the direction of supporting whole human development. In their introduction to the book, they highlight their reasons for doing so in a way that can concisely give us a sense of the scope of the problem in our present system of higher education:

Like many educators we know, we went to college seeking not only knowledge but a sense of meaning and purpose for our lives. Both of us had good teachers who helped along those lines, and we aspired to become teachers of that sort. But early on in our academic careers, we found that the disciplinary silos in which we had been educated—and the fragmentary and fragmenting assumptions about knowledge and humanity that often lay behind them—obscured as much as they revealed about the nature of reality and how to inhabit it as whole human beings. We found it increasingly

difficult to ‘color within the lines’ as we tried to teach in ways that answer Wendell Berry’s call to help students become more fully developed human beings.

Animated by our vocational passions and frustrations, both of us have felt called to work with others in helping higher education rejoin that which it too often puts asunder—for the sake of students, those who teach them, and a world that stands in need of integrative hearts and minds. We have been drawn to, and invite you to explore with us, the question at the heart of this book and the many conversations that led to it:

How can higher education become a more multidimensional enterprise, one that draws on the full range of human capacities for knowing, teaching and learning, that bridges the gaps between the disciplines; that forges stronger links between knowing the world and living creatively in solitude and community?

If we cannot find ways to respond to that question—not with a monolithic solution, but by laying down multiple threads of inquiry and experimentation that might come together in a larger and more coherent tapestry of insight and practice—we will continue to make fleeting and fragmentary responses to the hungers and needs of our students, to the abiding questions of the human adventure, and to the social, economic, and political challenges of our time. As large as that agenda obviously is, we believe it describes the calling of higher education, a calling embedded in its cultural and institutional DNA. (1-2 Palmer and Zajonc)

In this dissertation and in my work as a teacher in the classroom, I participate in this movement towards contemplative and integrative higher education by declining to assume the role of teacher-as-objectivist-researcher and by instead doing what Emerson did in his essays and

lectures—explain, teach, and perform poetic inquiry. The notion that poetic inquiry can be practiced as a mode of higher education in literary study is the beginning of my contribution to Palmer and Zajonc’s call for multiple threads of thought about how higher education can become a more integrative enterprise. As I hope I will show, a literary studies course which practices poetic inquiry rather than prosaic research as its mode of knowledge production is one in which the holistic empowerment and inspiration of all present becomes a primary concern.

My work improves somewhat on Emerson, I hope, because I have sought to bring down-to-earth and make plain some dimensions of poetic inquiry which can be rather esoterically inaccessible in Emerson’s explanation of the process.

As I will show, from Emerson’s essays I inherit two key ideas which I have already mentioned: 1) That poetic inquiry can and should be taught 2) That poetic inquiry can be usefully understood as a process of contemplative truth-seeking and creative expression.

1.3 EMERSON AND POETIC INQUIRY

After allowing that poetic inquiry as here discussed consists in contemplative truth-seeking and creative expression of the truths thus discovered, we might then further specify that the work of poetic inquiry consists in two major movements 1) Shifting into a contemplative perspective of expanded perception (i.e., “Possibility”—see my ensuing discussion of this condition) in pursuit of extra-rational (i.e., “poetic”) truth and 2) Creatively expressing truth perceived from that

contemplative perspective using the resources of poetic strategy (see my later discussion of poetic strategy).

Poetic inquiry can be considered a mode of literary study because intensive engagement with literary texts may be used to aid one or both of its movements. In other words, one may use the contemplative, non-analytical reading of literary texts in order to move into the expanded contemplative condition of Possibility, or one may study literary texts in order to better understand the ways in which they succeed in using poetic strategies for the purposes of poetic inquiry. Of course poetic inquiry also involves the generation of new poetic texts—or what we've come to call “creative writing.”

As I have mentioned, in his famous address to the Phi Beta Kappa society at Harvard, Emerson elaborated the process of poetic inquiry and referred to it as the work of “the American Scholar.” As it happens, though, the process is not necessarily American at all, nor does it resemble “scholarship” as that term is presently understood. In “The Poet,” an essay which came some years after “The American Scholar” address, Emerson described a very similar endeavor of contemplative truth-seeking and creative expression, this time with reference to the complex figure of “the poet” rather than to “the American Scholar.” We learn that in Emerson’s estimation, the title “poet” belongs not just to those who write verses, but to anyone (throughout the world, throughout history) who creatively brings forth a “new thought.” The new thought can be expressed in words or in action. According to Emerson, the quality of thought expressed matters more than does the genre of its expression. It appears that Emerson’s later notion of “the poet” embraces both the figure he initially describes as “the scholar” or “Man Thinking” and also those whose imaginative writing introduces a new thought (figures like Milton or Shakespeare).

For this reason, I prefer to call the process of discovery and expression which Emerson performed and valued “poetic inquiry” rather than “American scholarship.”

Emerson’s description of poetic inquiry, while providing much, also raises questions which call for further answers (as all proper fruits of poetic inquiry do), and often veers into a level of metaphysical idealism which can be difficult to translate into practical application. Still, understanding poetic inquiry at the lofty level Emerson presented it allows us to begin imagining how it might be executed on a more modest scale. By doing so we can envision a mode of study in higher education in which poems (verses, novels, essays, short stories, plays—any “imaginative writing”) can be read by students as examples of poetic inquiry and also taken as entrances or launching points for the students to conduct their own such explorations. In this mode of reading, written poems are regarded as active subjects—they become guides, teachers, and inspirers rather than just cultural artifacts or objects.

I should note that poetic inquiry is something that many of us are already doing all the time—just as a fact of being curious, inventive human creatures. It’s not primarily a mode of engaging with texts, but rather a mode of engaging with life that includes producing poetry (broadly defined as “new thought” or the creative expression of truth in any genre) and looking to already-existing texts (art works, deeds) for inspiration.

At the time that I designed the syllabus and the assignments for Reading the Soul of Poetry, I had not yet figured out exactly what poetic inquiry might be or how to define its movements. I only knew that I was interested in teaching myself and my students to do the work that Emerson describes “The American Scholar” and “The Poet” as doing, and that I felt strongly that Emerson himself, Whitman, and Dickinson were exemplary practioners of that work. Because “soul” is a central term for these writers, and because I still needed to figure out exactly

what the process of their work entailed, I defined the class in the course description as an “experimental, exploratory course designed to teach, implement, and reflectively question a soul-centered mode of reading and writing both poetry and responses to poetry.”

1.4 AMERICAN SCHOLAR, POETIC INQUIRER

The endeavors described in “The American Scholar” and “The Poet” are interrelated to the point that it’s impossible to clearly separate the work of “the scholar” from that of “the poet.”

Indeed, in his early essay, “Nature,” which foreshadows so many themes that he would later develop in more detail, Emerson claimed that “The true philosopher [i.e., the scholar] and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both” (29). The primary difference between “The American Scholar” and “The Poet” may be that in “The Poet” Emerson emphasizes much more what we are calling the second movement of poetic inquiry, i.e. the role and power of metaphoric or symbolic expression (poetic strategy) in the work of creatively communicating truths discovered in contemplation (in “The American Scholar” he calls these intuited truths “the facts amidst appearances” [52] and in “The Poet” he calls them “new thoughts” [288]) whereas in “The American Scholar” he emphasizes more heavily what we are calling the first movement of poetic inquiry, i.e., the work of truth-seeking contemplation and inward observation itself.

In “The American Scholar” Emerson explains that the duties of the poetic inquirer / scholar may be regarded as all “comprised in self trust” [52]. The virtue of self-trust or self-

reliance is the underpinning of all the work that the poetic inquirer / scholar must do, a necessary quality because the study it entails is inwardly-directed:

He [the poetic inquirer / scholar] plies the slow, unhonored, and unpaid task of observation. Flamsteed and Herschel, in their glazed observatories, may catalogue the stars with the praise of all men, and, the results being splendid and useful, honor is sure. But he, in his private observatory, cataloguing obscure and nebulous stars of the human mind, which as yet no man has thought of as such, - watching days and months, sometimes, for a few facts; correcting still his old records; - must relinquish display and immediate fame. (52)

The contemplative inner study of the scholar / poetic inquirer lacks the rationally verifiable and readily valued results of objectivist research (i.e., the kind conducted by scientists—Emerson’s example here are a pair of astronomers) and for this reason it requires self-trust: the poetic inquirer / scholar must trust the soundness of her own inner discoveries, because these discoveries cannot be verified objectively. So we come to understand that the first movement of poetic inquiry (contemplative truth-seeking) entails self-trust. In Emerson’s account of the process of poetic inquiry, this self-trust is ultimately rewarded by a difficult-to-explain phenomenon of profound recognition which can occur in the second movement of poetic inquiry, when contemplatively realized truths are creatively expressed and then received by others. We see this account in “The American Scholar” when Emerson describes how the process of contemplation and inward observation leads to discoveries which, when expressed to others, can have for them a surprising quality of felt validity:

In silence, in steadiness, in severe abstraction, let him [the scholar / poetic inquirer] hold by himself; add observation to observation, patient of neglect, patient of

reproach; and bide his own time, - happy enough, if he can satisfy himself alone, that this day he has seen something truly. Success treads on every right step. For the instinct is sure, that prompts him to tell his brother what he thinks. He then learns, that in going down into the secrets of his own mind, he has descended into the secrets of all minds. He learns that he who has mastered any law in his private thoughts, is master to that extent of all men whose language he speaks, and of all into whose language his own can be translated. The poet, in utter solitude remembering his spontaneous thoughts and recording them, is found to have recorded that, which men in crowded cities find true for them also. The orator distrusts at first the fitness of his frank confessions, - his want of knowledge of the persons he addresses, - until he finds that he is the complement of his hearers; - that they drink his words because he fulfils for them their own nature; the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds, this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true. The people delight in it; the better part of every man feels, This is my music; this is myself. (53-54)

What Emerson writes here is an elegant summary of the mysterious means by which poetic inquiry works: by “going down into the secrets of his own mind, he [the poetic inquirer] has descended into the secrets of all minds.” In other words, the poetic inquirer, rather than seeking to objectively study phenomena, instead cultivates an intensely subjective form of study—a study which can discover truths that may somewhat miraculously receive validation and verification from others when shared (“the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds, this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true”). In Emerson’s view, the weird fact that something discovered by an individual searching within her own mind may be found to be “most acceptable, most public, and universally true” is

explained by his poetic theory that all humans are fundamentally one at the level of soul. I call Emerson's notion of soul (about which I will have much more to say later) a "poetic theory" because unlike a scientific theory, which is a hypothesis that can be confirmed by objectively observed data, it's a hypothesis whose validity can be affirmed only by intuitive assent. Just as scientific theories are the fruit of scientific inquiries, poetic theories can be the fruit of poetic inquiries. It appears to me that Emerson's theory that all humans are one at the level of soul is one of the primary insights (oft-repeated and elaborated throughout his essays) gained from his own process of contemplative truth-seeking and creative expression. In order to perform poetic inquiry, it's not at all necessary to whole-heartedly accept Emerson's poetic theory of the soul, but as mine and my student's work in *Reading the Soul of Poetry* demonstrates, it's a theory that can serve as an interesting launching ground for further poetic inquiries—and this, perhaps, is the best value of the fruit of any poetic inquiry.

1.5 POETIC PERCEPTION AS AN ELEMENT OF POETIC INQUIRY

We might say that poetic inquiry begins with the willingness to regard experience poetically. According to Emerson, poetic perception includes a recognition of connectedness and interrelation between inner and outer realities. In the essay "Nature" Emerson first begins to emphasize the importance of poetic perception of the external world (i.e., "nature") for the seeker of truth:

The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to

their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.

When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet. The charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title. (5)

In this passage, Emerson offers an insight about just what exactly the “poetic” might be. According to him, it consists in an “integrity of impression.” It’s the ability to perceive wholeness rather than fragmentation. Emerson contrasts “the stick of timber of the wood-cutter” with “the tree of the poet” and we notice that a “stick of timber” is a fragment, a commodity to be used, something chopped and dead, while “the tree” is a unity, an entity to be regarded and appreciated, something in tact and alive. Likewise, Emerson contrasts the perspective which would look out at the land and see the property divisions with the eye of the poet that can “integrate all the parts” and perceive the wholeness of the landscape. So we gather that the intuition of unity is the hallmark of the poetic perspective.

In Emerson's ideal figure of the scholar / philosopher / poet, the intuition of unity in the poetic perspective is total. It represents a dramatic enlightenment, a state of higher realization. In "The Poet" Emerson refers to this unitive insight as "Imagination." He tells us that it

is a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees; by sharing the path or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucent to others. (298)

Yet in order to start on a project of poetic inquiry, I don't think it's necessary to be fully possessed of this realization of underlying oneness, and certainly not necessary to "believe" in it—I think it's only necessary to be willing to move towards it—in other words, to soften one's sense of oneself as a limited, isolated entity, as a subject for whom the world is merely object. Emerson suggests the means by which one approaches this softening shortly after he tells us that Imagination works "by sharing the path or circuit of things through forms":

The path of things is silent. Will they suffer a speaker to go with them? A spy they will not suffer; a lover, a poet, is the transcendency of their own nature—him they will suffer. The condition of true naming, on the poet's part, is his resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms, and accompanying that. (298)

Here, we gather that the softening of the self is a movement towards an attitude of surrender and receptivity, a willingness to deeply attend to what is present and to name it from that place of deep attention. This is a tall order. To accomplish it, one must be willing to step outside one's own daily agendas, demands, and conventional identity.

Towards the conclusion of "Nature" Emerson offers a passage which gives some additional insight into the qualities necessary for the cultivation of poetic perspective. Here,

Emerson both criticizes objectivist study (“empirical science”) as “unpoetic” (i.e., unable to perceive and contemplate wholeness) and offers a statement in favor of contemplative truth-seeking and creative expression instead:

In inquiries respecting the laws of the world and the frame of things, the highest reason is always the truest. That which seems faintly possible -- it is so refined, is often faint and dim because it is deepest seated in the mind among the eternal verities. Empirical science is apt to cloud the sight, and, by the very knowledge of functions and processes, to bereave the student of the manly contemplation of the whole. The savant becomes unpoetic. But the best read naturalist who lends an entire and devout attention to truth, will see that there remains much to learn of his relation to the world, and that it is not to be learned by any addition or subtraction or other comparison of known quantities, but is arrived at by untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery, and by entire humility. He will perceive that there are far more excellent qualities in the student than preciseness and infallibility; that a guess is often more fruitful than an indisputable affirmation, and that a dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred concerted experiments. (34)

The complaint that the divisions of science “bereave the student of the manly contemplation of the whole” and that thereby the “savant becomes unpoetic” is one that Emerson repeats in “The American Scholar.” The process that Emerson recommends instead, in which truth “is arrived at by untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery, and by entire humility” is poetic inquiry. His emphasis on “entire humility” points again to the qualities of surrender and receptivity which are necessary for contemplation.

2.0 THE TWO MOVEMENTS OF POETIC INQUIRY

2.1 THE FIRST MOVEMENT OF POETIC INQUIRY: CONTEMPLATIVE TRUTH-SEEKING AND ENTERING POSSIBILITY

The shift to poetic perception requires the willingness to enter, at least temporarily, the condition which I call “Possibility” (after a poem by Emily Dickinson) and which the poet Jane Hirshfield has called “liminality” in her book, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*. Hirshfield discusses dimensions what I am here calling poetic inquiry extensively in *Nine Gates*, but, like Emerson in “The Poet” she refers to it simply as the activity of poetry, or even more generally, as writing. I find it important to speak specifically of poetic inquiry because not all works that we commonly would refer to as poetry, and certainly not all writing, engages in or reflects the fruit of poetic inquiry. In “Writing and the Threshold Life,” the essay which concludes *Nine Gates*, Hirshfield discusses the specific condition entered into by the poetic inquirer. She draws the term “liminality” from a classic work of anthropology, *The Ritual Process* by Victor Turner. Hirshfield usefully summarizes Turner’s work on ritual rites of passage in order to explain what she means to connote by her choice of the term:

A number of specific characteristics mark this state of being ‘betwixt and between.’ First, the initiate undergoes the removal of both identity and status—he or she becomes nameless; conventional clothing is foregone; the usual constraints of gender no

longer apply. Ordinarily forbidden behavior is now allowed, or conversely, the person may enter into an extreme discipline equally foreign to conventional life. Often there is a period of silence and of nondoing, of fasting or going without sleep. Threshold persons are treated as outsiders and exiles, separated from the group, reviled, ignored. Akin in status to the unborn or the undead, they are not present in the community in any normal sense. Possessing nothing, they descend into invisibility and darkness, and – symbolically or literally—abandon both the physical and the ideological structures of society for a wilderness existence.

More is changed during this threshold period than simply the understanding of self; free of all usual roles, a person experiences community differently as well. The liminal is not opposite to, but the necessary companion of, identity and particularity—a person who steps outside her usual position falls away from any singular relationship to others and into oneness with the community as a whole. Within the separateness of liminality, connectedness itself is remade. A line of Gary Snyder’s describes the dynamic this way: ‘Awareness of emptiness brings forth the heart of compassion.’ [...] This aspect of the threshold makes the liminal writer not only an independent thinker but an engaged one—when a person identifies with the full range of citizens of a place, sentient and nonsentient, he or she cannot help but speak on their behalf.

(Hirshfield 204-210)

In Hirshfield’s description of the way the liminal condition allows for an expanded sense of oneness and compassion, we see mirrored Emerson’s claim that poetic perception (i.e., Imagination) is “a very high sort of seeing” which consists in “the intellect being where and what it sees.” In Hirshfield’s estimation, the greatest poets are those for whom “the liminal becomes

their only dwelling-place—becomes home.” We can also find Emerson also averring the necessity that one committed to a life of poetic exploration should have to lead a liminal existence at the conclusion of “The Poet”:

O poet! a new nobility is conferred in groves and pastures, and not in castles or by the sword-blade any longer. The conditions are hard, but equal. Thou shalt leave the world, and know the muse only. Thou shalt not know any longer the times, customs, graces, politics, or opinions of men, but shalt take all from the muse. For the time of towns is tolled from the world by funereal chimes, but in nature the universal hours are counted by succeeding tribes of animals and plants, and by the growth of joy on joy. God wills also that thou abdicate a manifold and duplex life, and that thou be content that others speak for thee. Others shall by thy gentlemen and shall represent all courtesy and worldly life for thee; others shall do the great and resounding actions also. Thou shalt lie close hid with nature, and canst not be afforded to the Capitol or the Exchange. The world is full of renunciations and apprenticeships, and this is thine: thou must pass for a fool and a churl for a long season. This is the screen and sheath in which Pan has protected his well-beloved flower, and thou shalt be known only to thine own, and they shall console thee with tenderest love. And thou shalt not be able to rehearse the names of thy friends in thy verse, for an old shame before the holy ideal. And this the reward;

that the ideal shall be real to thee, and the impressions of the actual world shall fall like summer rain, copious, but not troublesome to thy invulnerable essence.

(306)²

The conditions that Emerson describes as belonging to the fully dedicated poetic inquirer / poet are ones in which the conventional privileges of respectable adulthood—sophistication, speaking for oneself in public life, trade and business—are all surrendered. The surrendering of such privileges means that the dedicated poet / poetic inquirer “not present in the community in any normal sense.”

Hirshfield offers forth two of Emerson’s contemporaries, Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, as “examples of American writers who stepped fully, if by different means, into the

² Emerson also discusses the benefits of the liminal condition earlier in “The Poet” when he discusses how the poet accesses “a new energy... by abandonment to the nature of things.” In committing this abandonment, the poet discovers

that beside his privacy of power as an individual man, there is a great public power on which he can draw, by unlocking, at all risks, his human doors, and suffering the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him; then he is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals. The poet knows that he speaks adequately only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or ‘with the flower of the mind’; not with the intellect used as an organ, but with the intellect released from all service and suffered to take its direction from the celestial life, or as the ancients were wont to express themselves, not with intellect alone but with the intellect inebriated by nectar” (299).

life of threshold” and thereby achieved the capacity to speak from “the mind of openness and connection” (209) in a manner unburdened by societal expectations of what should or shouldn’t be said (217-218). In the writing of both Whitman and Dickinson we can find various commentaries on what it is to live liminally. Among the most memorable of these expressions and one which can afford us valuable insight about the process of poetic inquiry might be Dickinson’s oft-anthologized lyric, “I dwell in Possibility—“:

I dwell in Possibility—
A fairer House than Prose—
More numerous of Windows—
Superior—for Doors—

Of Chambers as the Cedars—
Impregnable of eye—
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky—

Of Visitors—the fairest—
For Occupation—This—
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise—

(Fr 466)

I offer that the house of “Possibility” can be read as a symbol of the liminal condition: it’s not only a house which abounds in thresholds (“More numerous of Windows-- / Superior for

Doors—“) but it’s also a house which declines to provide shelter from the elements (“And for an everlasting Roof-- / The Gambrels of the Sky”) and thus leaves its inhabitant open to receive the “fairest” visitors and to practice the gathering of “Paradise.” It’s of course significant also, that the house of Possibility is one which Dickinson compares to the house of Prose—implying that Possibility is identified with Prose’s other—poetry.

I find the term “Possibility” to be a useful word to describe the condition which it’s necessary to enter in order to begin poetic inquiry. I prefer it to Hirshfield’s “liminality” or Emerson’s “Imagination” because it’s free of both the associations of anthropology and also the complicated Romantic and idealist heritage of “Imagination” with a capital “I.” Also, “Possibility,” perhaps because Dickinson figures it as a house, suggests to me a state which one can readily enter or depart without undergoing either a full-fledged ritual rite of passage or a complete transcendental enlightenment. This distinction is important to me, given that I envision my work as a teacher of poetic inquiry not as a project of coaching my students into the life of a renunciate or a realized sage but rather as one of inviting those students to experiment with an alternative mode of being, perceiving, and expressing truth. The ultimate end of such experimentation could be that students decide to commit to “dwell[ing]” full-time in Possibility as Dickinson and Whitman did, but I’m pleased if by the end of the semester I simply see more openness, more compassion, more freedom in their writing.

Though I envision Possibility as a state which can be easily entered or exited, to enter it at all nonetheless requires accepting a risk, because it is a condition not only of enlarged receptivity but also of increased vulnerability.

2.2 ENTERING POSSIBILITY IN THE CLASSROOM

In *Reading the Soul of Poetry*, I asked my students to visit Possibility in a variety of ways (see my later discussion of these experiments and their associated writing prompts): by dressing up as their “poetical selves”; by participating in a poetry gift exchange; by attending to their night-time dreams. All of these were means of inviting my students to “get out of themselves” in some way—out of their conventionally limited identities. Yet, since the class’ official title was “Reading Poetry” the primary means by which I invited them to enter Possibility was through the contemplative, intensive, or thinking-with reading of poetic texts (see my later discussions of these varieties of reading).

Emerson comments instructively on the potential of texts to help us enter Possibility in “The American Scholar”:

The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him, life; it went out from him, truth. It came to him, short-lived actions; it went out from him, immortal thoughts. It came to him, business; it went from him, poetry. It was dead fact; now, it is quick thought. It can stand, and it can go. It now endures, it now flies, it now inspires. Precisely in proportion to the depth of mind from which it issued, so high does it soar, so long does it sing.

Or, I might say, it depends on how far the process had gone, of transmuting life into truth. (46)

Through Emerson's discussion we gain a radical sense of great books as a kind of alchemical product, the result of a transmutation of life into truth³ which, when attended to, can call forth from us a deep recognition of and identification with that truth:

It is remarkable, the character of the pleasure we derive from the best books. They impress us with the conviction, that one nature wrote and the same reads. We read the verses of one of the great English poets, of Chaucer, of Marvell, of Dryden, with the most modern joy, — with a pleasure, I mean, which is in great part caused by the abstraction of all *time* from their verses. There is some awe mixed with the joy of our surprise, when this poet, who lived in some past world, two or three hundred years ago, says that which lies close to my own soul, that which I also had wellnigh thought and said. (48)

The insight that “one nature wrote and the same reads” is a version of poetic perception (in which the intellect is “where and what it sees”). Thus we gather that the process of this readerly recognition of truth can be enough to trigger the kind of expanded awareness and identification which characterize Possibility.

³ “The transmutation of life into truth” is also a wonderful way of describing what poetic inquiry is.

2.3 TWO WAYS OF USING POEMS AS ENTRANCES TO POSSIBILITY: CONTEMPLATIVE (I.E. INTENSIVE) READING AND THINKING-WITH

For one engaged in a process of poetic inquiry, the fruits of poetic inquiries conducted by others in the past (i.e., poems or new thought in any genre) are most valuable as invitations or entrances into Possibility. Two modes of reading which deliberately approach poems for this purpose are contemplative (or intensive) reading and thinking-with. Contemplative and intensive reading is the kind that the great poetic inquirer Walt Whitman asks for in the “Preface” to *Leaves of Grass* when he recommends that his audience “read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life.” It is worth noting that Whitman asks for this kind of reading while at the same time recommending that his readers live in a manner similar to the way he sought to live, in a liminal condition (of self-reliance and resistance to societal norms):

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul; and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.

Whitman's injunctions amount to a list of behaviors whose practice can bring one to and hold one within the liminal condition (i.e., being in the world but not of it). I find fascinating his promise that if one lives this way "your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body." The effect that Whitman promises sounds to me like one of form being made transparent or translucent to creative truth.

This passage from Whitman's "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass* serves as a reminder to me that there are many practices and attitudes which go into the work of inhabiting the liminal condition of Possibility—in its truest mode, poetic inquiry is a way of life and not a casual experiment. The most amazing fruit of poetic inquiry comes from those who have committed to this kind of life, whether by means resembling Whitman's or by another route (like Dickinson or Rilke). We might call this "living in the questions" after a phrase from Rilke's advice to Hans Kappus, "And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer" (*Letters to a Young Poet* Letter 4).

2.4 CONTEMPLATIVE READING IN READING THE SOUL OF POETRY

Though poetic inquiry is at its best a way of life and not just a classroom practice, contemplative and intensive reading of a great poem like Whitman's can itself be a starting place, an entrance and an invitation, which, when openly and deeply received, can propel one to a life lived in the questions—or, at the very least, into a few moments of expanded perception. In *Reading the Soul*

of Poetry, we practiced this kind of reading during our Whitman's Gift experiment. I gave the students the following instructions:

Set aside at least an hour to spend with the excerpt from "Song of Myself" in *The Best Poems of the English Language*. Within this time, practice any strategies of becoming receptive to the gift of the poem that you might know, or invent. All three of the essays that we've read (Hirsch's, Emerson's, and Hyde's) provide suggestions about receiving the gift of poetry, and Whitman's own writing also provides suggestions. Feel free to use these as resources for developing a practice of receptivity. Write 1-2 pages about your work of becoming receptive to "Song of Myself"'s gift: tell us how you interacted with the poem, why you chose the process that you did; tell us about your attitudes, your expectations, your sense of the success of your practice. Be sure to note any interesting experiences that may have arisen through your engagement.

The responses my students offered to this prompt thrilled me with their depth and sensitivity. Hannah Swysgood reported an experience that begins with vividly imagined intimacy and concludes with giddy pleasure and wonder:

I sat Indian style on my bed with a blank pad of drawing paper and my poetry book opened up to the first page of "Song of Myself." I began reading the poem to myself in whispers, articulating every word, drawing out the final sounds, exaggerating the p's and s's. I imagined myself to be reading it to someone else in the room, sharing it with a person who I wished was with me at the time. By imagining this, the poem became much more intimate. By reading the poem I felt like it was mine to then give away, and by

whispering it into the air, imagining that someone was there listening, that I became the giver of the gift.

Another way I worked on receiving the poem was by sketching out images on my drawing pad of certain words and passages that I especially enjoyed. In section 32, there is a passage about a stallion, I ended up drawing a stallion reared up on his hind legs, and his body filled with the lines of the passage. My page eventually became filled with flames, graves, “white roses sweet-scented,” stiffened limbs outstretched...touching, buzzards, dinosaur bones, masculine landscapes, “soggy clods,” and “lovers and lamps.” “Lovers and lamps,” I repeated this pair of words over and over. I laughed as I imagined having these words tattooed as images on my arm. I envisioned lovers embraced in a passionate kiss followed by a “+” then a solitary table lamp.

Swysgood’s spontaneous decision to receive the gift of the poem by reading it aloud to the imagined presence of an absent friend, and therein discovering that “by whispering it into the air, imagining that someone was there listening ... I became the giver of the gift” reflects her intuitive realization of a truth that the renown poetry scholar Helen Vendler articulates in the first pages of her helpful *Poems Poets Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology*:

. . . a lyric is meant to be spoken by its reader as if the reader were the one uttering the words. A lyric poem is a script for performance by its reader. It is, then, the most intimate of genres, constructing a twinship between writer and reader. And it is the most universal of genres, because it presumes that reader resembles the writer enough to step into the writer’s shoes and speak the lines the writer has written as though they were the reader’s own... (x – xi)

While Vendler's articulation of this truth is succinct and honest, I confess I am deeply happy that the format and contemplative exercises of *Reading the Soul of Poetry* allowed Swysgood and other students to come to this fundamental understanding independently and intuitively (in other words, self-reliantly) rather than having to learn it from an anthology, however wise. There is a sense of awed urgency and almost pained delight in Swysgood's report of her experience with taking on Whitman's poem as a script for her own intimate performance, a sense that I'm confident she will remember and revisit because it was her own discovery.

The courage to practice contemplative reading is a form of self-reliance that needs to be modeled, to be taught. So much that my students have encountered previously in their educational careers has convinced them that the reading of poetry is work that's exclusively analytical, something akin to the solving of a math problem. One of the students in *Reading the Soul of Poetry*, Sofia Oluwole, confronted and worked to overcome this previous training in her response to the Whitman's Gift prompt:

After I finished the assignment [our essay which asked us to think-with a poem from the Bloom anthology rather than "about" it] I realized that I had not fully understood the goal of the assignment because this way of thinking was so strange to me. I don't think I understood how challenging it would be until I started. I realized that even though I thought I was reading the poem in the intended way, I didn't truly take the poem in small enough sips. Rather I attempted to make sense of the poem as I read along. When I was told to read "A Song of Myself," a new poem, my decision was to start afresh with a new poem and this time try to accomplish what I could not with "Apology for Bad Dreams" [the poem by Robinson Jeffers that Oluwole had worked with for the thinking-with essay]. So I knew that I would not go around quoting lines from the

poem or writing lines on a friend's body [playful activities of reception that I had suggested]. My process of reception could occur through my thought. If I could really let go of my inhibitions, I knew that I would be able to receive Whitman gift. I was actually flipping through our text, and I happened to find a phrase. The phrase that was quoted by the book's author was originally said by Samuel Johnson, the writer of the poem I chose to recite. The line was "Imagination is always scheming to escape the pressures of reality." So my strategy was to focus on the lines that I did not immediately connect with. In doing so, I hoped to force myself to think outside my typical, everyday train of thought.

When I first read through the poem, I noted the phrases that I spontaneously "received." These were the lines, the sentences, and the words that made me wish I had Whitman's gift of eloquence. So I used the best instrument I could to fully accept the gift. My mind is the source of my thoughts. And my feelings, emotions, and reactions to the poem would be a reflection and a product of my thoughts. I read these lines over and over. Not out loud because I felt that my voice would influence my reception of the words. I also tried focusing on lines that did not immediately interest me because I did not immediately understand them. One of the lines was "I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin, hoping to cease not until death." So my first reaction was "Begin what? What does he mean?" So I read it again. And again. In my reformed, renewed, newly opened mind I thought that there was an intentional reason for not stating a specific task that he would begin. Maybe he is making reference to imaginations being in perfect health and our often unawareness of this. I guess the beauty lies in acknowledging that you may never fully be able to comprehend every line, but in just

enjoying the words and letting them move you, at least in that time before you study organic chemistry and finish your history paper. My thinking-with instead of thinking-of required me to allow my imagination to “escape the pressures of reality.” The beauty comes in allowing myself to think outside of the normal constraints of scientific, analytical thinking. In reading with a truly open mind I realized that I making a conscious attempt to make sense of the poem was only inhibiting my complete creative process. I let Whitman’s words take its natural course and this time I followed instead of trying to lead.

Oluwole here grapples with her conditioned desire to analyze and “make sense of the poem” (i.e., to engage in the relatively shallow activity that Whitman, in the opening of “Song of Myself” teasingly calls “get[ing] at the meaning of poems” [Whitman 3]). Her decision to not read Whitman’s lines aloud “because I felt that my voice would influence my reception of the words” could be read as a lingering hesitancy to engage in the invitation to twinship and identity which Whitman’s lyric very explicitly offers (“I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to / you” [1]). Indeed, Whitman’s voice, performing as it does a kind of humorously swaggering self-reliance (“I cock my hat as I please indoors or out. / Why should I pray? Why should I venerate and be ceremonious? / Having pried through the strata and analyzed to a / hair, and counseled with doctors and calculated / close, / I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones” [32-33]) is surely a difficult voice to assume identity with if one has any reservations about the value or necessity of self-trust. Yet though Oluwole, a chemistry major admittedly more comfortable with “scientific, analytical thinking” than poetic reception, decides not to embrace Whitman’s text as a script for her own self (as Swysgood does) by reading it aloud and thus merging it with her own voice, her

decision is not a simple refusal but rather an attempt to fully hear Whitman himself as he wishes to be heard—not as a riddler presenting a puzzle to be analyzed but as a democratic prophet spilling forth what he claims ‘is the common air that bathes the globe. / This is the breath of laws and songs and behavior, / This is the tasteless water of souls ... this is the true sustenance...’

(29). I was especially impressed by Oluwole’s willingness to attend to “lines that did not immediately interest me because I did not immediately understand them,” a practice she continued throughout the semester and found fruitful.

2.5 THINKING-WITH AS A MODE OF POETIC INQUIRY

Contemplative modes of reading (like those I invited students to practice in our Whitman’s Gift prompt) offer potential entrances into Possibility via the cultivation of primarily affective or imaginal relationships with poems.

Thinking-with is a mode of reading that can also offer an entrance into Possibility: it consists in the intentional expansion of one’s own thought on a given subject by closely attending to and moving forward with the images or “new thought” offered forth by a poem. Yet this type of reading is not a preparation for poetic inquiry (as contemplative reading may be) but is itself a mode of poetic inquiry which uses an already-existing poem as the grounds for questioning. The philosopher Martin Heidegger modeled this kind of reading in his late essays on poetry and language, perhaps most extensively in “What Are Poets For?” In “What Are Poets For?” Heidegger thinks-with the symbolic expressions of the poets Holderlin and Rilke by taking the poets’ terms as points of truth from which to launch a consideration which answers the titular question. This mode of reading arises from Heidegger’s perceptive insight that there are

elements of phenomenal reality which are not accessible to conventional, prosaic thought and language. We could say that this insight is a foundational realization of poetic inquiry in general—the recognition that there are truths which need to be sought, experienced and expressed that evade literal expression. In his poem-essay “The Thinker as Poet” Heidegger writes,

Few are experienced enough in the
difference between an object of scholarship
and a matter thought. (5)

In this stanza, it seems to me that Heidegger points to the difference between poetic inquiry and the kind of objectivist scholarship that Palmer laments as dominating our system of education. In poetic inquiry, everything—nature (Emerson’s favorite), human relationships, poems— can be “matter thought” or starting points used for contemplative truth-seeking. Thinking-with is a mode of reading that approaches poems as “matter thought,” as living, dynamic *subjects* to be dialogically interacted with rather than as dead *objects* of scholarship: in other words, thinking-with does not seek to create knowledge “about” a poem but rather “through” it.

Thinking-with is a valuable means of accepting or assimilating the fruits of poetic inquiry into our own perception.

Like contemplative and intensive reading, thinking-with asks for a degree of surrender: one must surrender one’s usual terms of thought to the symbolic thought of the poem in order to conduct this kind of reading.

The kind of thought which results from experiments in thinking-with often must itself use poetic strategies in order to rise to the level asked for by the poem one is attending to. Heidegger's prose could certainly be an example of this.

It could also be argued that thinking-with is, in Emersonian terms, a form of "creative reading." Emerson first mentions creative reading in "The American Scholar" in the section wherein he discusses the scholar's relationship with books. There, he argues that most books are not rich enough substance to inspire the scholar / poetic inquirer, therefore "one must be an inventor to read well":

We all know, that, as the human body can be nourished on any food, though it were boiled grass and the broth of shoes, so the human mind can be fed by any knowledge. And great and heroic men have existed, who had almost no other information than by the printed page. I only would say, that it needs a strong head to bear that diet. One must be an inventor to read well. As the proverb says, "He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies." There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world. We then see, what is always true, that, as the seer's hour of vision is short and rare among heavy days and months, so is its record, perchance, the least part of his volume. The discerning will read, in his Plato or Shakspeare, only that least part, - only the authentic utterances of the oracle; - all the rest he rejects, were it never so many times Plato's and Shakspeare's. (48)

Thinking-with is a way of bracing the mind “by labor and invention” for when one thinks-with a poem one is only partially, but not entirely surrendering to the terms of the poem (one may seek to accomplish an entire surrender in contemplative reading). In thinking-with, one has a project of thought, a question that one brings to the poem. The question that one brings to the poem is the means by which one “carr[ies] out the wealth of the Indies.” I love Emerson’s claim that when one reads with such a project, “the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion.” The sparkling luminosity of thinking-with comes from the active engagement of my thought as a reader with the thought of the poet as a writer. In the above passage, Emerson reflects on how creative reading can make it worthwhile to read even otherwise unstimulating books. I think that creative reading (i.e. thinking-with) can, however, most profitably be applied to books which one *does* find rich and stimulating. The literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, in his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, offers an account of the magic that occurs in the work of thinking-with, which, we might say, (to use Bakhtin’s terms) is a dialogic process because it puts our thought in dialogue with the thought of the poet. Bakhtin comments on Dostoevsky’s art:

The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of *others*. Human thought becomes genuine thought, that is, an idea, only under conditions of living contact with another and alien thought, a thought embodied in someone else’s voice, that is, in someone else’s consciousness expressed in discourse. At that point of contact between voice-consciousnesses the idea is born and lives.

The idea, as it was *seen* by Dostoevsky the artist—is not a subjective

individual-psychological formation with “permanent resident rights” in a person’s head; no, the idea is inter-individual and inter-subjective—the realm of its existence is not individual consciousness but dialogic communion *between* consciousnesses. The idea is a *live event*, played out at the point of dialogic meeting between two or several consciousnesses. . . .

It is precisely as such a live event, playing itself out between consciousness-voices, that Dostoevsky saw and artistically represented the *idea*. It is this artistic discovery of the dialogic nature of the idea of consciousness, of every human life illuminated by consciousness (and therefore to some minimal degree concerned with ideas) that made Dostoevsky a great artist of the idea. (88)

Bakhtin here describes the way that Dostoevsky *represents* and artistically dramatizes the dialogic nature of the idea by having multiple voice-consciousnesses interact in his novels, but it can readily be seen that the phenomenon which Bakhtin is describing is not limited to something that only happens within the novel itself, but is something which occurs in all kinds of communicative interchanges—between author and reader, between two people speaking, etc. Bakhtin’s insight, then, that “the idea is inter-individual and inter-subjective—the realm of its existence is not individual consciousness but dialogic communion *between* consciousnesses” expands for us Emerson’s claim from “The American Scholar” that by going down into the secrets of her own mind, the poetic inquirer can discover truths which are the secrets of all minds. Bakhtin’s description of the way the idea is “a *live event*” highlights the sense that whatever truth a poetic inquirer may discover, that truth is not a truth in isolation, but only comes alive as truth, as a new thought, when it becomes available to other minds for communion,

recognition, elaboration. We might say that extra-rational poetic truth is truth by virtue of its inter-subjective, transpersonal communication and acceptance.

The work of thinking-with is a mode of reading in which the poetic inquirer deliberately engages with the fruit of past poetic inquiries (i.e., poems) in order to find what “secrets of all minds” might be expressed there, and to bring them to life in dialogic communion in her own consciousness.

2.6 THINKING-WITH IN READING THE SOUL OF POETRY

As I mentioned previously, the question that Heidegger brings to Rilke’s poem in “What Are Poets For?” is, of course, “what are poets for?” This question is one which for Heidegger is central to his project of thought about language and being in his later essays. In attempting to have my class do the work of thinking-with, I first assigned them to write an essay that thought-with any poem of their choice on any topic of their choice. The results were overwhelmingly disappointing and lackluster—probably because I failed to initially explain well what the work of thinking-with entailed and also possibly because many of my students did not have an already-strongly articulated project of thought with which to engage their chosen poem. Also, many chose poems from our anthology to think-with which were the same that they chose for our memorization experiment, and thus the poems were chosen more for the pleasingness of their rhyme scheme than the depth of their new thought (even though I explicitly asked students to memorize poems which they felt embodied a new thought—but this request must have been overridden by their need to find something relatively easy to memorize). So disheartened was I by the results of our initial foray into thinking-with that I was ready to give up trying to

communicate how to do it to my students. Yet in our mid-term reflections I asked them what concepts we had worked with that they were interested in learning more about, and thinking-with came up again and again as a topic of interest. So later in the semester I determined that we should do something that I had feared to have the class do—read Heidegger’s “What are Poets For?” and read Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. It’s slightly insane to ask students in their first class on reading poetry to undertake reading Heidegger and Rilke’s masterpieces, but one of my qualities as a teacher (perhaps both a strength and a weakness) is that I don’t know how to teach an important concept except from the texts which originally taught it to me. When I tried to teach thinking-with without reference to Heidegger or Rilke, I failed in my own estimation. After my students requested that I teach them more about thinking-with, I determined that since I learned how to think-with poetry by reading Heidegger’s readings of Rilke and then by reading Rilke myself, in a manner which modeled on Heidegger’s practice but which elaborated to include my own pressing questions about life and the world—I would have to ask them to do the same.

Since “one must be an inventor” to do the kind of creative reading that thinking-with entails, it is important that one have an already-articulated inquiry to bring to the poem that one reads—and, if one hopes that inquiry to be maximally fruitful, I think it’s also important that the poem one chooses to engage with in this fashion is itself rich with new thought. After we had read and discussed “What Are Poets For?”, *The Duino Elegies*, and also Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, I gave my students a prompt to get them to practice thinking-with which both gave them a defined project of thought (“what are lovers for?”) and also assigned them a work to think-with (*The Duino Elegies*). Noticing that Heidegger had brought a question to Rilke (“what are poets for?”) which both obsessed Heidegger and also clearly obsessed Rilke (i.e., Rilke spent his whole life passionately asking and answering the question in various ways), I thought that we

might also have success by bringing a question to Rilke which would hopefully be an obsession for both us and for him. Upon re-reading *Sonnets to Orpheus*, *Letters to a Young Poet*, and *The Duino Elegies*, it occurred to me that another powerfully obsessing question for Rilke is “What are lovers for?” I thought that this question might have a wide appeal for my students, since what young person doesn’t spend time wondering, delighting, and despairing about romantic love? I reproduce the prompt below:

Read-Around Prompt: What are Lovers For?

Consideration

In his essay “What Are Poets For?” the philosopher Martin Heidegger thinks-with the poetry of Hölderlin and Rilke in order to offer an exploration of language, Being, will, and the situation of human existence. As he himself acknowledges within the essay, Heidegger hardly finished the job. There’s a lot more remaining to think-with in Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. Heidegger himself modestly shied away from working directly on the elegies and their sister works, *The Sonnets to Orpheus*:

We are not only unprepared for an interpretation of the elegies and the sonnets, but also we have no right to it, because the realm in which the dialogue between poetry and thinking goes on can be discovered, reached, and explored in thought only slowly. Who today would presume to claim that he is at home with the nature of poetry as well as with the nature of thinking and, in addition, strong enough to bring the nature of the two into

the most extreme discord and so to establish their concord? (96 *Poetry Language Thought*)

For the purpose of this assignment, we are going to consider ourselves “strong enough” to think-with the elegies, building upon Heidegger’s work.

Instructions

Model your writing on Heidegger’s strategies of thinking-with. Pose the question “What are lovers for?” (Heidegger thought-with Rilke’s poem “As Nature gives the other creatures over” in order to explore the question “what are poets for?” an exploration that ends up taking into consideration uniquely human modes of being and willing—your exploration could similarly end up taking into consideration issues that at first seem unconnected to lovers). Chose one of the elegies to focus upon. Zero in on a specific stanza. Choose words in that stanza that strike you as “basic words” which resonate throughout the elegies and whose truths, when elaborated, when thought-with, can help to answer your question. For example, you might choose to focus on the first stanza of the Third Elegy and to consider “blood,” and “desire” as the “basic words” whose meaning is key to thinking-with Rilke about your question. Then, referring to places elsewhere in the elegies (maybe the third stanza of the Second Elegy where he talks about “bloodstream”) or in *Letters to a Young Poet*, you would explain what specifically Rilke points to when he speaks of “blood” and “desire,” describing the resonances those terms have within other moments in the poetry. How do the terms operate in ways that differ from our usual, prosaic usages of those words? How does understanding Rilke’s unique

deployment of those words help us to understand exactly what is being said in your chosen passage? What possible answer do you discover to the question “What are Lovers For?” from your process of thinking-with?

The benefit of thinking-with words used by a great poet in an extra-ordinary or enlarged sense is that our own thinking can thereby become extra-ordinary, taken out of its usual ruts or assumptions. Thinking-with Rilke, we might learn something totally new about “What are lovers for?” that we would not have guessed in a million years on our own.

In this prompt, I asked students to do the work of thinking-with mainly by focusing in on certain words that Rilke uses in specific and potentially strange or illuminating ways and then dwelling upon those terms, explaining just how they go about opening new avenues of thought for the question at hand. This work is of course not simply taking Rilke’s words out of context and “riffing” on them. It is itself an effective mode of poetic inquiry because it is deeply attending to the way in which the poet uses language as symbol or new thought in order to take us closer to a perception of the dynamic truth of weird-wonder which is our world, a wonder which is covered-over by our ordinary, conventional uses of language and conditioned habits of thought. Taking individual terms from the poem and dwelling upon them, elaborating them, works as a technique of thinking-with and opening out of conditioned ordinary thought, because it is a way of confronting and not shying away from or dismissing as simply fanciful the poet’s use of terms. It’s work that involves a kind of patience and open-minded trust that the focused attention we give as readers will be rewarded with new insights—that if we stick with the poet’s

terms patiently, we will discover what the poet has discovered, we will allow the time that it takes for the new idea to come to live in communion with our own consciousness.

Heidegger uses this same technique of thinking-with in “What Are Poets For?”, where the “basic words” from Rilke’s poem that Heidegger takes up are Nature, Open, and venture. Heidegger has a distinct advantage over my students and myself in reading Rilke in that he not only natively reads, writes, and speaks German but also has an amazing command of German and Greek philology. Thus Heidegger is able to enter a level of sophistication in thinking-with Rilke’s terms that is inaccessible to my students and myself. Nonetheless, I think the strange brilliance of Rilke’s deployment of language (like that in the fruit of all great poetic inquiries) doesn’t require a deep knowledge of philology in order to be thought-with. I think that just paying attention to the way in which Rilke’s usage alters and expands the meaning of ordinary terms under the pressure of his truth-seeking poetic strategies is an entrance into allowing his use of those terms to expand our own thought. With this assumption in place, I asked my students to think-with Rilke’s terms in order to move towards answering “What are lovers for?” The results of this assignment were much more successful than the results of the first thinking-with assignment, I think in part because we read Heidegger showing how sustained attention to Rilke’s use of language could be rewarding and expanding for an important project of thought. My students offered responses to the prompt in which I felt I could see them enlarging their perception with the help of Rilke’s terms. A student named Andrew Thomas produced a response to the prompt which I felt was especially far-reaching:

What Are Lovers For?

"Look, sometimes I find that my hands have become aware of each other, or that my time-worn face shelters itself inside them. That gives me a slight sensation. But who would dare to exist, just for that?"

Is it then enough for lovers to exist for this slight sensation described in Rilke's Second Elegy? Is the feeling of shelter the time-worn face feels from the aware hands the feeling of love lovers inevitably feel for each other? Or perhaps it is the awareness the hands feel, aware of each other, aware of the face they guard, and seemingly implied, aware of nothing else, that is equated to the love of lovers. Lovers are aware of each other like no one else is aware. If no mortal is aware even of his own mortality, how is it that lovers can be aware of each other, an awareness that is indeed, love? I suppose the sensation of finding the hands aware of each other is equated to that of the time-worn face being sheltered by these hands. Yet the hands are still not considered SELF-aware, still, just aware of the other. Then perhaps the purpose of love is indeed this sense of awareness, which is love, that goes beyond even our awareness of ourselves. An infinite passion and intimacy, an awareness, that reaches beyond even what we are capable of understanding in our own souls.

"...you who may disappear because the other has wholly emerged: I am asking you about us."

Love is a curious thing in which, as it snakes its roots into the soul of the affected, the lover and the loved, our self-awareness dissipates. It does not disappear, but it evaporates into the recesses of the soul, still and eternally present, but nearly forgotten, unnoticed, as a patch of helium in a room immediately following the balloon is popped.

The vines of love work their way into our very being, pumping us with the awareness of our lover and as we pursue them, we become lost; we are consumed with only their existence, their love for us, and our love for them and only then may we "disappear because the other has wholly emerged." The lover has forgotten all but his beloved, the beloved is wholly emerged as the lover's purpose for being. We exist only for our beloved.

"lovers, _are_ you the same? When you lift yourselves up to each other's mouth and your lips join, drink against drink: oh how strangely each drinker seeps away from his action."

What is the action each drinker seeps away from? The act of becoming aware? Of loving? Or simply of drinking? If becoming aware of our beloved is to the detriment of self-awareness then in this moment of intimacy, this act of union, we seep away from the awareness of ourselves. So do we seep away from the drink as the lover disappears during the emergence of the beloved, because in that moment, there is no lover and no beloved. There is no drink. Only the sensation. Only love. The awareness itself has become all that is, and in each lover's disappearance in favor of the emergence of the other, nothing remains but one love. One awareness.

Lovers then, are not about a mere companionship to challenge life together, but lovers are the union of two souls into one, the forgetting of oneself and the awareness only of the beloved, each gravitating against the other in mutual orbit, unable to slow or part, leaving only revolutions of existence within each other.

Thomas' response to this prompt looks to me like an example of thinking-with as poetic inquiry because he both demonstrates a condition of open-minded Possibility occasioned by the prompt

and perhaps by his own genuine curiosity and willingness to learn, and also explaining what he discovers in Rilke by using poetic strategies of his own. Also, Thomas inventively reads metaphor or symbol in Rilke's poem to serve the purpose of his inquiry, just as a poetic inquirer using the natural world as a starting place of contemplation might inventively read metaphor or symbol into the workings of nature (something which Whitman, Emerson, and Dickinson loved to do). The terms of Rilke's that I see Thomas most prominently thinking-with are "awareness" and "sensation." The passage that Thomas begins with, from Rilke's second elegy, "Look, sometimes I find that my hands have become aware / of each other, or that my time-worn face / shelters itself inside them. That gives me a slight / sensation. But who would dare to exist, just for that?" is one where Rilke makes an observation about the ability of the body to sense itself (or, we might even say, of the self to perceive its own existence) and then raises a question about the sufficiency of this awareness. We might think that Thomas' first move somewhat bold—he, without explanation or justification, ascribes the "slight sensation" that Rilke talks about as a consequence of one hand touching another or touching the face to the feeling of lovers aware of one another. I myself would be inclined to read the same passage that Thomas cites as a place where Rilke is wondering about the sufficiency of the self's awareness of itself and beginning to long for the presence of another, not as a place where Rilke is offering a metaphor about the experience of lovers touching. Yet in Thomas' inventive reading, he takes the hands and face which are aware of one another and the slight sensation that they generate when touching as metaphors for the encounter of lovers—each hand is a lover, the face is a lover ("Is the feeling of shelter the time-worn face feels from the aware hands the feeling of love lovers inevitably feel for each other? Or perhaps is it the awareness the hands feel, aware of each other, aware of the face they guard, and seemingly implied, aware of nothing else, that is equated to the love of

lovers?") This circuit of thought about the awareness of hands-and-face as metaphors for the awareness of lovers leads Thomas to an observation that deepens my own reading of Rilke: "Yet the hands are still not considered SELF-aware still, just aware of the other." I think this observation has a worthwhile point: the hands in the passage are feeling one another or feeling the face—Rilke *doesn't* dwell on the awareness of each hand of its own awareness, but on the awareness of each hand of the other hand and of the face.

This observation on Thomas' part detracts from the strength of my initial reading of the passage and lends strength to Thomas' interpretation of it as a metaphor about lovers' awareness of one another. The observation then occasions an opportunity for Thomas to venture an answer to our question, "what are lovers for?": "Then perhaps the purpose of love is indeed this sense of awareness, which is love, that goes beyond even our awareness of ourselves. An infinite passion and intimacy, an awareness that reaches beyond even what we are capable of understanding in our own souls." This insight strikes me as an instance of enlarged imagination: Thomas begins to ponder love as a mode of perception which is so absorbing that it annihilates self-awareness. It also strikes me as a thought that Thomas perhaps would not have arrived upon if not for the benefit of his pondering Rilke's passage and Rilke's use of the terms "awareness" and "sensation."

The next passage Thomas uses to think-with is also from the second elegy, where Rilke is indeed explicitly describing lovers. Rilke offers another observation and question: "you who may disappear before the other has wholly / emerged: I am asking *you* about us." Now I see Thomas' thinking-with moving to another level, as he elaborates upon Rilke's thoughts about love using metaphors of his own invention. As Thomas thinks-with Rilke, love becomes "a curious thing... which snakes its root into... the lover and the loved" causing self-awareness to

dissipate like a “patch of helium in a room immediately following the balloon is popped.”

Thomas thus uses poetic strategies to deepen ours and his own participation in Rilke’s radical thought about love. His image of self-awareness dissipating in love like helium out of a popped balloon is quite arresting and does the work of expanding for me my own understanding of the way love affects the awareness of the lover. In other words, I experience Thomas’ use of metaphor as communicating to me a new thought, not by means of rational argument but by the extra-rational means of poetic strategy which evoke in me a sense of recognition or intuition of the truth his metaphor points to. With precision, Thomas’ metaphor enhances my experience of the notion of “dissipation”—making it concrete and vivid. The suddenness of the helium balloon popping, the magical lightness of helium, the way in which helium balloons are associated with festive celebrations, the thinness of the balloon’s skin—all of these associations and connotations add to my comprehension and recognition of Thomas’ sense here.

Finally, Thomas approaches another passage from the same elegy: “lovers, *are* you the same? When you lift yourselves up to each other's mouth and your lips join, drink against drink: oh how strangely each drinker seeps away from his action.” In his thinking-with this passage, Thomas focuses upon Rilke’s strange symbolic uses of the words “drink” and “action” and entwines them with his previous thought about Rilke’s consideration of “awareness”:

What is the action each drinker seeps away from? The act of becoming aware? Of loving? Or simply of drinking? If becoming aware of our beloved is to the detriment of self-awareness then in this moment of intimacy, this act of union, we seep away from the awareness of ourselves.

Here, we see Thomas wrestling to understand Rilke’s difficult sense of “action” in the passage by putting it into the context of what he has already learned about lovers’ “awareness.” Thomas

raises the possibility that the action described is the act “of becoming aware” of “loving” and of “drinking”—without deciding that the action is definitely any one of these things or definitely *not* any one of these things, he goes on to offer that the action described *is* an “act of union” in which “we seep away from the awareness of ourselves.” From Thomas’ discussion we gain the sense that the “action” in Rilke’s passage is simultaneously one of becoming aware, of loving, of drinking, of union. Thomas thus deals adroitly with the radical un-decidability and un-finalizability of the lover’s “action,” an ambiguity whose fullness, drawn out for us by Thomas’ thinking-with, communicates a poetic truth about the nature of love.

Thomas concludes his thinking-with Rilke by offering another startling metaphor of his own:

Lovers then, are not about a mere companionship to challenge life together, but lovers are the union of two souls into one, the forgetting of oneself and the awareness only of the beloved, each gravitating against the other in mutual orbit, unable to slow or part, leaving only revolutions of existence within each other.

The metaphor that Thomas offers, of lovers as celestial bodies locked “in mutual orbit” is of course not an original one, but it is one made fresh by its appearance within the context of Thomas’ foregoing reading of Rilke and his preceding tropes: lovers as hands touching one another, love as a snaking root, self-awareness as dissipating helium from a balloon, the action of love as drinking, becoming aware, uniting. It’s also beautifully expressed; lovers as celestial bodies leave “only revolutions of existence within each other”—that’s what they’re for.

2.7 THE SECOND MOVEMENT OF POETIC INQUIRY: POETIC STRATEGIES, OFFENSES AND DREAMS

The venerable literary critic Hazard Adams names four properties of poetry which he calls its “offenses”: gesture, drama, fiction, and trope. These provide a useful means for thinking about just what is entailed in the second movement of poetic inquiry, the creative expression of truth. By “gesture” Adams refers to the ability for words in poetry to have what we have just referred to as a quality of opacity: they can “remain, in a sense, mute, yet capable of releasing what Keats called ‘a momentous depth of speculation’” (112)⁴. By drama he means the necessarily present

⁴ Adams develops his definition of “gesture” from R.P. Blackmur. In order to understand more what Adams means by gesture it’s helpful to look at the quote he offers from R.P. Blackmur’s essay, “Language as Gesture” and his commentary thereon:

A few pages later, Blackmur writes: “Gesture, in language, is the outward and dramatic play of inward and imagined meaning. It is the play of meaningfulness among words which cannot be defined in their use together; gesture is that meaningfulness which is moving in every sense of that word; what moves the words and what moves us” (6). Blackmur’s ‘meaningfulness’ appears to be an effort to avoid the straightforward ‘meaning,’ severely limited in denotation by logical positivists. At the same time, it is an effort to rescue for gesture some of the authority of ‘meaning.’ Meaningfulness is exactly that quality of language given short shrift by the positivists. It is as if Blackmur is emphasizing fullness, a burgeoning beyond capturable meaning: ‘surplus’ in later critical jargon (Adams 99-100).

“fiction of a speaker” or poetic persona (115). “Fiction” indicates that which “feigns truth” (or, as we would have it, “veracity”) (137). “Trope” includes primarily metaphor, but also metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (144). These properties are offensive because each “stands antithetical to and confounds a binary opposition that the culture identifies with logicity and common sense” (261). Adams acknowledges that “The four offenses are potential in all use of language, but poems think *in* them, while other uses claim to communicate *with* them” (157).⁵ I offer that poetry (i.e., the fruit of poetic inquiry) thinks *in* gesture, drama, fiction and trope because these are the sly means by which the ever-evasive truth-as-unveiling may be approached. On reflection, we may notice that these properties are also the strategies of dreams. I would posit that poetry is offensive because it speaks in the language of dreams. In other words, poetry offends the common-sense rational mind because it bypasses or exceeds that mind and speaks directly to the extra-rational psyche⁶ instead, in the psyche’s own language.

Indeed, one way of understanding poetic inquiry to acknowledge that it’s simply the work of participating consciously and deliberately in the same labor that occurs each night as we dream.

As we sleep we are automatically brought to the surrendered, vulnerable, liminal condition of Possibility. And we might venture to say that the stuff which arises in dreams (alternate worlds, dramas, symbols, verbal and visual rhymes, puns, motifs and themes, ironies, archetypes and epic conflicts, magnifications and heightenings, identifications with characters and personas far different from that of our own ordinary waking self) are both answers to the

⁶ “Psyche,” of course, is one of the Greek words for “soul.” Please see my discussion of “soul” later in this dissertation.

questions that the psyche is silently (sleepingly) asking itself (i.e., “What is true?”) and also the posers of further questions. Emerson gives emphatic recognition to the relationship between the conscious work of the poetic inquirer and the unconscious creation of dreams in a passage near the end of “The Poet” where he abruptly stops speaking about the ideal, already-achieved poetic inquirer and instead addresses himself directly to the one who is-not-yet but would-be:

Doubt not, O poet, but persist! Say ‘It is in me, and shall out.’ Stand there, balked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until at last rage draw out of thee that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity. Nothing walks, or creeps, or grows, or exists, which must not in turn arise and walk before him as an exponent of his meaning. Comes he to that power, his genius is no longer exhaustible. All the creatures by pairs and by tribes pour into his mind as into a Noah’s ark, to come forth again to people a new world. This is like the stock of air for our respiration or for the combustion of our fireplace; not a measure of gallons, but the entire atmosphere if wanted. And therefore the rich poets, as Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Raphael, have obviously no limits to their works except the limits of their lifetime, and resemble a mirror carried through the street, ready to render an image of every created thing. (305-306)

One reason I am given to believe that the work of poetic inquiry is available to and important for everyone to do (not just for monumental genius-types like Shakespeare) is that we all possess “that *dream*-power.” There is something within every person that creates the most incredible poems—every night, effortlessly, while we sleep. This simple fact should not be

under-valued or dismissed. Poetic inquiry is something that is happening within our lives whether we will it or not, whether we attend to it or not. I am given to think that we enrich our experience when we choose to participate deliberately and consciously in this same process of shifting perspective and symbolizing truth which is intrinsic and necessary to our being to the point that we are so constituted that it must happen automatically in us every night.

In her response to the first prompt of the semester (which I quoted from earlier), Molly Burkett narrated what was for her a significant experience of poetic-inquiry-in-dreaming:

A specific intense encounter with poetics that stands out to me is a dream itself. After I fell asleep and ventured through countless places forgotten by morning, an adventure that stuck with me was found in a forest. I walked among trees and saw a house, made up of tiny saplings all growing in symbiosis with each other to form the shape of a foundation, four walls, doorways, and windows. I entered; it was of vintage décor, filled with tiny trinkets found on the shelves of second hand stores, memories of grandmothers I never had. The scent of age filled me up like the bottles of Speedball printing ink found on the back shelves, a sour tinge, the pigments of color separated from the oil of the emulsion. There were cameras with flashbulbs and I picked one up, took a picture and when the whiteness cleared, in front of me stood a woman. She also held a camera and took a picture of me. I went outside the house when she disappeared after the final flash. There was a mermaid spewing kind remarks from a kiddie pool and a whale in a pond. Two horses with boards in place of their heads galloped in fear from an alligator made up of bushes. The only noises heard were when the hooves of the pair crashed against the leaves of the gator, rustling his would be scales and chasing him into the woods.

This dream has stuck with me in a way that none other up until this date has. I feel a connection to every creature I encountered and feel proud of their beautiful creation. I made them up, they came from me, and so I hold their beauty in high esteem. My soul was enlightened to my new aesthetics and I began to view nature as an entity in unison rather than separate beings. I am a photographer and image is key to capturing light and perfection in a frame. I felt that this dream accessed my soul because it was a projection of me. I was the woman with the camera, beautiful and wise, also the mermaid, voluptuous and positive, and the horses, defensive and unafraid. After this dream, my ideas about myself shifted and my soul felt content with the person I had become. I feel wonderfully vintage and real, grounded.

In Burkett's narrative, it's easy to see the soul posing questions to itself and answering these questions in a dream with images, symbols, story. We might guess that the questions the soul posed to itself were ones regarding identity and artistic vocation: Who am I? What is it given to me to do? What is it to be a woman and an artist? The dream gives answers: "a house, made up of tiny saplings all growing in symbiosis with each other" which is filled with "tiny trinkets... memories of grandmothers I never had" where the dreamer finds cameras; upon taking a picture and the flash receding, she is met by a woman who then in turn photographs *her*; a series of encounters with mermaids, horses, alligators which results in a pervasive sense of connection. The answers given by the dream must also pose further questions—for example—what does the house made up of "tiny saplings all growing in symbiosis with each other" signify? I find it fascinating that Burkett reports that the dream brought her to an aesthetic perception in which she "began to view nature as an entity in unison rather than separate beings" since this is the very insight which Emerson claims as the foundation for imagination and

symbolic expression. It would seem that in some sense, Burkett's dream initiated her as an artist into the conscious process of poetic inquiry.

2.8 WHY POETIC STRATEGIES ARE NECESSARY TO THE SECOND MOVEMENT OF POETIC INQUIRY

I find it useful to think as Adams' four offenses of poetry (gesture, drama, fiction, trope) as strategies of the second step of poetic inquiry (the articulation of truth-as-unveiling in response to the question "what is the deep truth?"). It will be readily seen that these strategies are not fully discrete or ultimately separable from one another. For example, drama is the "fiction" of a speaker, trope is itself a "gesture" or a turning.

As I will show, in *Reading the Soul of Poetry* I invited my students to practice these strategies through diverse means. In many cases my students' practice consisted in what Adams calls "rhetorical or external use" (142). In other words, some students deployed gesture, drama, fiction and trope in their assignments but the end result was not what I would call the fruit of poetic inquiry because these students used the strategies in a way that declined to speak to the question of deep truth. This "missing the mark," however, was not disappointing to me as a teacher because the deep truth is something so elusive. Though I could not coax all my students into approaching it or articulating it, I could at least alert them to potential means of doing so.

Does one have to use poetic strategy (trope, gesture, fiction and drama – see the following discussion of these in the next section) in order to communicate what one discovers while dwelling in Possibility? No—many things might be discovered while dwelling in

Possibility, depending on what kind of question one has posed and what kind of things one's mind pulls into its orbit. For example, one might discover the structure of an atom or the solution to a mathematical equation while dwelling in Possibility. The solution to a mathematical equation, though, is something whose validity could be subsequently communicated to others using rational proof.

Alternatively, while dwelling in Possibility one might discover truths that one feels no desire to share with others. In this case, no use of poetic strategy would be necessary. What distinguishes poetic inquiry from simply shifting into Possibility and asking questions and receiving intuitive answers (which we might call, simply, "inquiry") is that poetic inquiry attempts to articulate (either to oneself or to others) the truth that is intuitively received in such a way that the validity of those truths are made available for the audience to perceive them experientially without the benefit of rational proof.

Often the truths discovered by poetic inquiry are rooted in subjective experience and intuition rather than in objective observation, and they cannot be communicated via rational proof. In order to be recognized *as true* by others they need to be expressed in such a way that they stimulate a similar lived experience of truth in the reader as they did in the writer. Poetic strategies are the means by which lived experience (i.e., existential or intuited truth) may be communicated. The poet Robert Frost, in an essay titled "The Figure a Poem Makes" eloquently described this function of poetic communication:

It should be of the pleasure of a poem itself to tell how it can. The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it

runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life-not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood-and indeed from the very mood. It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for the last. It finds its own name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase at once wise and sad-the happy-sad blend of the drinking song.

No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew. I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialized from cloud or risen out of the ground. There is a glad recognition of the long lost and the rest follows. Step by step the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing. The impressions most useful to my purpose seem always those I was unaware of and so made no note of at the time when taken, and the conclusion is come to that like giants we are always hurling experience ahead of us to pave the future with against the day when we may want to strike a line of purpose across it for somewhere. The line will have the more charm for not being mechanically straight. We enjoy the straight crookedness of a good walking stick. Modern instruments of precision are being used to make things crooked as if by eye and hand in the old days.

I tell how there may be a better wildness of logic than of inconsequence. But the logic is backward, in retrospect, after the act. It must be more felt than seen ahead like prophecy. It must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader. For it to be that there must have been the greatest freedom of the material to

move about in it and to establish relations in it regardless of time and space, previous relation, and everything but affinity.

The figure is the same as for love. Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting. A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but may not be worried into being. Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it. Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a petal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went. (440-441)

Frost's description of how a poem should come into being emphasizes the poem as both something which comes to the writer as an intuition out of the unknown, an event, an experience in itself ("It finds its own name as it goes") and also as a medium which, when successful, creates an identity of feeling and experience between writer and reader ("No tears for the writer, no tears for the reader"). Frost's memorable analogy of how a poem can come into being and be experienced by both writer and reader as lived revelation is one of dissolution, disappearance, and transformation of a substance from one state to another: "Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride its own melting." The communication not just of abstract information but of vivid experience is the special quality of poetic strategy, and the quality which make poetic strategies the most worthwhile medium for relating extra-rational truth.

3.0 HEIDEGGER AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF POETIC INQUIRY

Since we've discussed the way in which Heideggerian thinking-with can be performed as a mode of poetic inquiry, we might now pause to consider the way in which Heidegger's larger thought about the nature of poetry, language, will and technology frames the importance of poetic inquiry as a mode of generating and sharing knowledge. Heidegger's thought about poetry is similar to Emerson's in that Heidegger also considered the genre of writing which conventionally goes by the name "poetry" to be but one possible (though significant and valuable) expression of poetry proper, which is actually a way of being in the world and a mode of bringing forth truth. Like Emerson, Heidegger also considered poetry and the poetic to be central to life and vigorously rejected the notion that poetry might be a merely aesthetic pastime. In the introduction to one of his essays, he eloquently lamented the contemporary state of the consideration of poetry as he considered the possible truth of the poet Holderlin's claim that "...poetically man dwells...":

But when there is still room left in today's dwelling for the poetic, and time is still set aside, what comes to pass is at best a preoccupation with aestheticizing, whether in writing or on the air. Poetry is either rejected as a frivolous mooning and vaporizing into the unknown, and a flight into dreamland, or is counted as a part of literature. And the validity of literature is assessed by the latest prevailing standard. The prevailing standard, in turn, is made and controlled by the organs for making public civilized opinions. One of its functionaries—at once driver and

driven- is the literature industry. In such a setting poetry cannot appear otherwise than as literature. Where it is studied entirely in educational and scientific terms, it is the object of literary history. Western poetry goes under the general heading of 'European literature.' (211-212 *Poetry Language Thought*).

This lament, with its radically high regard for poetry and its sense that poetry is not just "literature" is a useful place to begin our exploration of Heidegger's thought. If poetry is not literature, and if it is not properly the object of literary history—then what is it? Heidegger ventures to answer this question throughout his late essays on language and poetry.

Yet these late essays are somewhat difficult to discuss due to the fact that they themselves are written in very dense, poetic language. This density and refusal to resort to conventional terms to describe poetry and reality is part of what makes Heidegger such a brilliant philosopher of poetry.

In order to understand Heidegger's writing about poetry, it's first important to note that for the ancient Greeks and for Heidegger, *poiesis* is something that includes both *physis*, or the bringing-forth of something directly out of itself (as in the emergence of a leaf from a stalk or the birth of a baby from a mother), and also *technē*, the work of bringing something forth through the use of an external medium (10 *The Question*). Written verse is usually thought to be the product of *poiesis as technē*. That this view is widely popular is evident in the large-scale presence of creative writing "workshops" at contemporary colleges and universities, wherein the composing of poetry is addressed primarily as a craft to be improved through practice and critique.

Very significantly for our consideration of the importance of poetic inquiry, in reading the late essays we discern that in Heidegger's opinion, a real poet is one who brings forth poems

through a process which much more closely resembles *physis* rather than *technē*. More accurately, we could say that for Heidegger, a real poet is one who brings forth poems through a use of *technē* which is so surrendered and so exquisite that through the *technē* poetry emerges as *physis*. This means that in Heidegger's estimation some written verse, particularly the work of very great poets, is the result of a kind of sophisticated *physis-through-technē* rather than ordinary *technē* and so can be regarded as itself a resource of insight about the nature of Being. In other words, it is because Heidegger regards the work of Holderlin, Rilke, and Trakl as works of *physis-through-technē* that he uses them as the starting places for his thinking-with about the nature of language. Heidegger considers the works of these poets to be "spoken purely" ("Language" 192), to have emerged directly from Being. Heidegger never explicitly stated the distinction between *technē* poetry and *physis-through-technē* poetry in these terms, yet it's evidenced and hinted toward throughout the late work. Instead, he somewhat clumsily spoke of "inauthentic" versus "authentic" poetry in "... Poetically Man Dwells..." and refers to *physis-through-technē* poetry as "what is spoken purely." The lack of an explicit statement of the difference between *technē* poetry and *physis-through-technē* poetry in the late essays is attributable to the fact that in these essays, Heidegger was actively thinking through the qualities of poetry and language which led him to intuit such a difference. In other words, he was thinking through and explaining the difference without precisely naming it because he was just discovering it. We as readers have the benefit of being able to see that the difference between *technē* and *physis-through-technē* elegantly marks the boundary that Heidegger struggled to articulate.

In Heidegger's late essays, the distinction between writing which emerges as *technē* and writing which emerges as *physis-through-technē* is a matter of the quality of will possessed by

the poet. It's a matter of the poet declining to exercise self-assertive will (i.e., the poet declines to treat both the world and also language as objects to be used and manipulated) and instead choosing to *be willing* (i.e. the poet surrenders herself and her faculties to the service of something larger than her individual will, to Being itself). Indeed, for Heidegger, *physis*-through-*technē* poetry is a unique source of insight about the nature of Being since it is specifically the *physis* of language, and in his understanding "Language is the precinct (*templum*), that is, the house of Being" ("What Are Poets For?" 129). We can readily see that Heidegger's depiction of great poetry as emerging through a *physis* process accords with Emerson's observation that "it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing." It also accords with Emerson's parable about poems- as-the-spores-of-genius from "The Poet":

Genius is the activity which repairs the decay of things, whether wholly or partly of a material and finite kind. Nature, through all her kingdoms, insures herself. Nobody cares for planting the poor fungus; so she shakes down from the gills of one agaric countless spores, any one of which, being preserved, transmits new billions of spores to-morrow or next day. The new agaric of this hour has a chance which the old one had not. This atom of seed is thrown into a new place, not subject to the accidents which destroyed its parent two rods off. She makes a man; and having brought him to ripe age, she will no longer run the risk of losing this wonder at a blow, but she detaches from him a new self, that the kind may be safe from accidents to which the individual is exposed. So when the soul of the poet has come to ripeness of thought, she detaches and sends away from it its

poems or songs—a fearless, sleepless, deathless progeny, which is not exposed to accidents of the weary kingdom of time; a fearless, vivacious offspring, clad with wings (such was the virtue of the soul out of which they came) which carry them fast and far, and infix them irrevocably into the hearts of men. These wings are the beauty of the poet’s soul. The songs, thus flying immortal from their mortal parent, are pursued by clamorous flights of censures, which swarm in far greater numbers and threaten to devour them; but these last are not winged. At the end of a very short leap they fall plump down and rot, having received from the souls out of which they came no beautiful wings. But the melodies of the poet ascend and leap and pierce into the deeps of infinite time. (297)

In the above parable, the poet is receptive ground fertilized by spores of genius who ripen him and then cause him to cast off winged spores or seeds in the form of poems and songs. Thus, the poems emerge from the poet through a process of *physis*. The role of the poet is decidedly a feminine one of surrendered willingness—the labor of the poet is to receive, to ripen, and to give forth.

“What Are Poets For?” is an essay that thinks-with Rilke’s *physis-through-technē* poetry in order to imagine what this kind of surrendered willingness is like, how it serves the work of poetry, and how it serves the quality of our Being. There’s a very important and under-discussed moment in “What Are Poets For?” where Heidegger, who in his masterwork, *Being and Time*, had previously defined the fundamental experience of human beingness (or *Dasein*) as care, anxiety and worry (or *Sorge*), discovers through his reading of Rilke’s poem that there is a mode of beingness available to humans which refuses to objectify the world through willful self-assertion and which through this refusal to objectify or calculate stunningly becomes care free,

sine cura. This is the mode of being occupied by “the more venturesome” or “the more daring”—by true poets (137 *Poetry Language Thought*). Poets are the more venturesome, the more daring because they are willing to risk being without the illusion of control brought by objectification and willful self-assertion. Heidegger writes:

The daring that is more venturesome, willing more strongly than any self-assertion, because it is willing, “creates” a secureness for us in the Open. To create means to fetch from the source. And to fetch from the source means to take up what springs forth and to bring what has been so received. The more venturesome daring of the willing exercise of the will manufactures nothing. It receives, and gives what it has received. The more venturesome daring accomplishes, but it does not produce. Only a daring that becomes more daring by being willing can accomplish in receiving. (118 *Poetry Language Thought*)

Heidegger’s emphasis on *physis-through-technē* poetry as something which is not manufactured or produced but rather created, and his definition of creation as “to take up what springs forth and to bring what has been so received” matches Lewis Hyde’s compelling discussion of poetic creativity as something which is best understood in terms of gift economics. It also harmonizes with Emerson’s discussion of the poet as one who receptively discerns the essences of all things and makes those essences manifest to others through language, “by sharing the path or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucent to others” (298). Emerson wrote that the poet “overhears” and “endeavors to write down the notes” of the essential spiritual melodies which play through all things (298). Heidegger begins to very movingly discuss the function of poetry-as-*physis-through-technē* versus poetry-as-*technē* towards the conclusion of “What Are Poets For?”:

When, in relation to beings in terms of representation and production, we relate ourselves at the same time by making propositional assertions, such a saying is not what is willed. Asserting remains a way and a means. [This is poetry-as-*technē* and also all use of language which is merely *technē*, including philosophy.] By contrast, there is a saying that really engages in saying, yet without reflecting upon language, which would make even language into one more object [this is poetry-as-*physis-through-technē*]. To be involved in saying is the mark of a saying that follows something to be said, solely in order to say it. What is to be said would then be what by nature belongs to the province of language. And that, thought metaphysically, is particular beings as a whole. Their wholeness is the intactness of the pure draft, the sound wholeness of the Open, in that it makes room within itself for man. This happens in the world's inner space. That space touches man when, in the inner recalling of conversion, he turns toward the space of the heart. The more venturesome ones turn the unwholesomeness of unshieldedness into the soundness of worldly existence. This is what is to be said. In the saying it turns itself toward man. The more venturesome are they who say in a greater degree, in the manner of the singer. Their singing is turned away from all purposeful self-assertion. It is not a willing in the sense of desire. Their song does not solicit anything to be produced. In the song, the world's inner space concedes space within itself. The song of these singers is neither solicitation nor trade. (135 *Poetry Language Thought*)

Heidegger's insight that the song of venturesome poets "is turned away from all purposeful self-assertion" and "does not solicit anything to be produced" means that such singing is

distinguished from all deployments of language which seek to use it instrumentally, towards a purposeful end. Instead, the song simply emerges when the poet turns toward and is touched by “the space of the heart.” Later in the essay, he turns to lines from Holderlin (“To sing in truth is another breath. / A breath for nothing. An afflatus in the god. A wind.” [136 *Poetry Language Thought*]) in order to consider the way this non-solicitous singing relates to the notion of breath present in Holderlin. This discussion of breath has meaningful resonances with the language that Emerson uses to discuss the movement of the Over-Soul through humans, which we will soon re-examine. Heidegger writes:

The breath by which the more venturesome are more daring does not mean only or first of all the barely noticeable, because evanescent, measure of a difference; rather, it means directly the word and the nature of language. Those who are more daring by a breath [i.e., poets] dare the venture with language. They are the sayers who more sayingly say. For this one breath by which they are more daring is not just a saying of any sort; rather, this one breath is another breath, a saying other than the rest of human saying. The other breath is no longer solicitous for this or that objective thing; it is a a breath for nothing. The singer’s saying says the sound whole of worldly existence, which invisibly offers its space within the world’s inner space of the heart. The song does not even first follow what is to be said. The song is belonging to the whole of the pure draft. Singing is drawn by the draft of the wind of the unheard-of center full of Nature. The song itself is “a wind.” (137 *Poetry Language Thought*)

Here, Heidegger considers the breath which moves through the poet as “a breath for nothing”—a surrendered breath, so surrendered that it is actually “a wind.” This description reminds us of Emerson’s claim in “The Over-Soul” that

What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresents himself. Him we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend. When it breathes through his intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love. And the blindness of the intellect begins when it would be something of itself. The weakness of the will begins when the individual would be something of himself. All reform aims in some one particular to let the soul have its way through us; in other words, to engage us to obey. (238)

For both Heidegger and for Emerson, the most astounding results of human creativity come when the individual allows something greater to “breathe” through her. Emerson calls this greater breath or creative force “the soul” while Heidegger refers to it as “the will as which Being wills beings” (138 *Poetry Language Thought*). It is easy to see, also, that the willingness to enter a state of surrendered receptivity which for Heidegger is the province of the “more venturesome” poets is identical with the willingness to enter a risky, liminal condition of Possibility. We’ve already seen that the willingness to enter Possibility is the first movement of poetic inquiry, and we can see now that this determination is affirmed by Heidegger’s rich thought on language and poetry.

3.1 POETIC INQUIRY VS. PHILOSOPHIC AND SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY IN HEIDEGGER

Now that we grasp the significant distinction between poetry-as-*technē* and poetry-as-*physis*-through-*technē*, it's important that we understand the larger argument about our mode of being in the world which for Heidegger makes poetry so important. To quickly give a sense of the scope of this argument, I'll lean on an excellent summary and paraphrase taken from the introduction to *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. As we read this summary, we can notice the ways in which Heidegger's critique of technology accords with two arguments we've already reviewed: both with Parker Palmer's rejection of objectivist education and also with Charles Eisenstein's critique of the scientific attitude as a culturally conditioned set of assumptions rather than a transparent tool for accessing "reality." We can also attend to the ways in which Heidegger considers *poiesis* or poetic dwelling as an alternative to science which objectifies and technology which seeks mastery.

The fundamental Greek experience of reality was, Heidegger believes, one in which men were immediately responsive to whatever was presencing to them. They openly received whatever spontaneously met them (AWP 131).

For the Greeks the coming into the 'present' out of the 'not-present' was *poiesis* (QT 10). This "bringing forth" was manifest first of all in *physis*, that presencing wherein the bursting-forth arose from within the thing itself [i.e., in the emergence of a blossom from a bough]. *Technē* was also a form of this bringing forth, but one in which the bursting-forth lay not in the thing itself but in another. In *technē*, through art and handcraft, man participated in conjunction with other contributing elements—with

‘matter,’ ‘aspect,’ and ‘circumscribing bounds’ – in the bringing forth of a thing into being (QT 7-8). Moreover the arts of the mind were called *technē* also (QT 13).

Greek man openly received and made known that which offered itself to him. Yet nevertheless he tended in the face of the onrush of the revealing of Being in all that met him to seek to master it. It is just this tendency toward mastery that shows itself in Greek philosophy.

Philosophy sprang from the fundamental Greek experience of reality. The philosopher wondered at the presencing of things and, wondering, fixed upon them. (That, Heidegger remarks, is why Thales tumbled into a well! [Sem 11]). The philosopher sought to grasp and consider reality, to discover whatever might be permanent within it, so as to know what it truly was. But precisely in so doing he distanced himself from Being, which was manifesting itself in the presencing of all particular beings. For in his seeking, he reached out not simply to receive with openness, but also to control. Here, to Heidegger’s thinking, lies the real origin of the modern technological age. (xxiv – xxv)

Here we learn that Heidegger observed that the “tendency toward mastery” of Greek philosophy eventually led to the scientific attitude. The original Greek habit of openly receiving and then making known that which offers itself, minus the seeking of mastery or control, is *poëisis-as-physis-through-technē* or what we have here been calling “poetic inquiry.” It’s the practice of language and truth as *physis*, as a creation which is received from the source and given forth as it was received rather than as a production or manufacture. Philosophical inquiry departed from the

physis quality of poetic inquiry because philosophical inquiry sought mastery or control rather than surrendering to bringing forth what offers itself. In other words, according to Heidegger, the modern technological age began when people departed from *poiesis-as-physis-through-technē*, as simply responsively giving forth what they received, and instead began to focus on *poiesis-as-technē*. This departure led to philosophical inquiry and then to scientific inquiry, both of which seek to ascertain stable verities that, once established, can be used to launch various projects of control, and both of which demand an objectifying perspective in order to reach their aims. The summary continues:

Modern science is for Heidegger a work of man as subject in this sense. Modern man as scientist, through the prescribed procedures of experiment, inquires of nature to learn more and more about it. But in so doing he does not relate himself to nature as the [pre-philosophic] Greek related himself to the multitudinous presencing of everything that met him spontaneously at every turn. He does not relate to nature in the openness of immediate response. For the scientist's 'nature' is in fact, Heidegger says, a human construction. Science strikingly manifests the way in which modern man as subject *represents* reality. The modern scientist does not let things presence as they are in themselves. He arrests them, objectifies them, sets them over against himself, precisely by representing them to himself in a particular way. Modern theory, Heidegger says, is an 'entrapping and securing refining of the real' (SR 167). Reality as 'nature' is represented as a manifold of cause and effect coherences. So represented, nature becomes amenable to experiment. But this does not happen simply

because nature intrinsically *is* of this character; rather it happens, Heidegger avers, specifically because man himself *represents* nature as of this character and then grasps and investigates it according to methods that, not surprisingly, fit perfectly the reality so conceived. (xxv)

The notion that “the scientist’s ‘nature’... is a human construction” is one that we previously saw Charles Eisenstein pointing to in his book of cultural criticism, *The Ascent of Humanity* when he explains that scientific inquiry, by its own selective principles, blinds itself to analysis of phenomena in which “the experimenter is an inseparable aspect,” thus limiting its analysis of the real. Also, Heidegger’s observation as paraphrased in the summary that “The modern scientist does not let things presence as they are in themselves. He arrests them, objectifies them, sets them over against himself, precisely by representing them to himself in a particular way” is similar to Parker Palmer’s assessment that

The mode of knowing that dominates education creates disconnections between teachers, their subjects, and their students because it is rooted in fear. This mode, called *objectivism*, portrays truth as something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the thing we want to know. (51)

We earlier looked to Eisenstein’s and Palmer’s work in order to make clear the ways in which poetic inquiry as described by Emerson differed from dominant models of knowledge acquisition both today and at the time that Emerson wrote. Having begun to engage with Heidegger, we can now appreciate that the same argument for the importance of poetic inquiry or *poieisis* as a way of knowing and being also exists in Heidegger’s work.

Given that Heidegger is one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, and also one who is not widely understood to be closely akin to Emerson, our observation that Heidegger and Emerson both advocated poetic inquiry as an alternative and supplement to scientific inquiry is a significant discovery which gives added urgency to our notion that poetry inquiry can and should be taught. Heidegger concluded an essay, “The Age of the World Picture” in which he elaborated the ways in which the modern attitude (i.e., the attitude of objectivism) regards and manipulates the world as a represented series of objectified calculations with a hopeful affirmation of the power of poetic inquiry to alter the dire course thus charted. This affirmation mirrors Emerson’s hopeful claim at the start of “The American Scholar” that poetry will be the polestar for a new age. After affirming that we are in danger as long as we attempt solely to know through calculation and thus blind ourselves to the depth of what is incalculable, Heidegger writes: “Man will know the incalculable – that is, safeguard it in its truth – only in creative questioning and forming from out of the power of genuine reflection” (72 *Off the Beaten Track*). “Creative questioning” is a locution we could easily use as a synonym for our preferred term, “poetic inquiry.” We also have reason to assume that poetic inquiry is implied by the term “creative questioning” because Heidegger here speaks of “creative questioning” as a means of knowing the incalculable, a project which in “...Poetically Man Dwells...” he discussed as the province of poetry.

Furthermore, Heidegger wrote at the conclusion of “The Question Concerning Technology” (an essay which explores the ways in which the calculating, objectifying and extracting projects of modern technology threatens to destroy earthly existence while asking if this threat and destruction is necessarily essential to the nature of technology itself) about the potential for the poetic to reveal itself as the ultimate essence of *technē*, as *technē* deployed non-

instrumentally (i.e., without a project of control or mastery), thus opening the way for *physis-through-technē* to become not just a mode by which written poetry is produced but to also be a way of living and being in the world. Heidegger there seems to optimistically suggest that through its own poetic destiny, technology in our present age is on the verge of evolving into something which is harmoniously fruitful rather than menacingly destructive.

Yet perhaps most interestingly given our previous decision to name the liminal condition of surrendered receptivity which is necessary to poetic inquiry “Possibility” after Emily Dickinson’s poem “I dwell in Possibility” (in which Dickinson suggests that “Possibility” is “Poetry”—the counterpart of Prose) —we not only remember that Heidegger devotes a whole essay (“...Poetically Man Dwells...”) to establishing that “The poetic is the basic capacity for human dwelling” but we also see Heidegger discuss this poetic dwelling as something fundamentally necessary to the preservation of existence in “Building Dwelling Thinking”:

The mortals are the human beings. They are called mortals because they can die. To die means to be capable of death *as* death. Only man dies, and indeed continually, as long as he remains on earth, under the sky, before the divinities. When we speak of mortals, we are already thinking of the other three along with them, but we give no thought to the simple oneness of the four.

The simple oneness of the four we call *the fourfold*. Mortals *are* in the fourfold by *dwelling*. But the basic character of dwelling is to spare, to preserve. Mortals dwell in the way they preserve the fourfold in its essential being, its presencing. Accordingly, the preserving that dwells is fourfold.

Mortals dwell in that they save the earth—taking the word in the old sense still known to Lessing. Saving does not only snatch something from a danger. To save really

means to set something free into its own presencing. To save the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it, which is merely one step from spoliation.

Mortals dwell in that they receive the sky as sky. They leave to the sun and moon their journey, to the stars their courses, to the seasons their blessing and their inclemency; they do not turn night into day or day into a harassed unrest.

Mortals dwell in that they wait the divinities as divinities. In hope they hold up to the divinities what is un hoped for. They wait for intimations of their coming and do not mistake the signs of their absence. They do not make their gods for themselves and do not worship idols. In the very depth of misfortune they wait for the weal that has been withdrawn.

Mortals dwell in that they initiate their own nature—their being capable of death as death—into the use and practice of this capacity, so that there may be a good death. To initiate mortals into the nature of death in no way means to make death, as empty Nothing, the goal. Nor does it mean to darken dwelling by blindly staring toward the end. (148-149 *Poetry Language Thought*)

Thus Heidegger discusses poetic dwelling not only as a means of receiving inspiration and producing great poems, but as a way of life in which the dweller sets earth, sky, divinity and morality itself “free into its own presencing.” At the conclusion of “Building Dwelling Thinking” he realizes that it’s the duty of mortals “to bring dwelling to the fullness of its nature” which they do “when they build out of dwelling, and think for the sake of dwelling.” In other words, when human technologies— such as the raising structures for habitation (“building”) and also philosophic inquiry (“thinking”)— can be part of what sustains existence in a balanced and happy manner when these technologies arise out of an attitude of surrendered receptivity (i.e.,

Possibility—the first movement of poetic inquiry) and are used as media of articulation in the second movement of poetic inquiry, the creative expression of extra-rational (i.e., non-calculable) truth. Were we to live in this way, all of our homes, our thoughts, our institutions, our talk (i.e., anything we might “build” or “think”—i.e., anything we might create externally or internally) would be a “poem” in the highest sense of *poeisis-as-physis-through-technē*.

If we are willing to agree with Emerson and Heidegger, we can surmise that the labor of learning to practice poetic inquiry is one of dramatic meaning and significance—to the extent that we can poetically inquire (i.e., enter Possibility and then bring forth responsive expressions of what we find there) we become capable not only of writing verse poems but of producing a world in which *all* our creations (the thoughts we think, the houses we build, the institutions we found) are themselves poems alive with beauty and truth and not artifacts of calculation, exploitation and control as human productions have too often tended to be within modernity.

4.0 POETIC INQUIRY AND RESISTANCE

There are poems which immediately resonate with us. We sense some kind of compelling power at work in them and we're drawn to read these attentively again and again. As I've noted, this kind of spontaneous connection with a work or body of works in which we feel "one nature wrote and the same reads" may be itself a means of relatively easy entrance into Possibility. "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman is a poem which has this effect for me and many of my students.

Meanwhile, many other works will not be so readily accessible or compelling. We might resist them for whatever reason—they seem too difficult, too ancient or too modern; they're authored by someone of a class or race or gender we don't identify with or value; we "can't relate" to the subject matter.

Like Emerson, I highly prize the kind of reading which occurs when one finds a text that seems to have an immediate and intense relationship with one's own being.

I am also interested in a kind of reading which Emerson does not discuss- the kind which becomes possible only after one has questioned her existing prejudices and resistances. This kind of reading interests me because it entails an undefended or less-defended encounter with "otherness." An important virtue of such an encounter is that it potentially loosens one's own habitual adherence to conditioned views or identities and thus improves one's ability to dwell in liminality / Possibility.

In order to help my students question the prejudices and resistances which can encumber their reading and prevent them from encountering the gift of poetry, I practice with them a process known as The Work of Byron Katie.

The Work of Byron Katie is itself a written process of inquiry (indeed, Byron Katie also refers to The Work as simply “inquiry” [7 Katie]). In this process, one starts by identifying what Katie calls a “stressful thought”—usually a resentment or negative judgment of some kind. One does this by filling in a “Judge-Your-Neighbor Worksheet” which offers form statements: “I am _____ at _____ because _____”; “_____ should _____” “I want _____ to _____” (11). After identifying the stressful thought, one slowly asks herself (or has a partner ask her) four simple questions. The questions are: 1) Is it true? 2) Can you absolutely know that it’s true? 3) How do you react, what happens when you believe that thought? 4) Who would you be without that thought? Katie recommends that the inquirer direct these questions to the heart (which she calls “the gentler polarity of mind”[23]) rather than to the usual thinking self and take one’s time in listening for the answers. After one has answered the four questions, one takes the initial thought and turns it around in three different ways: to self, opposite, and other and then finds ways in which the turned-around statements could be equally true or more true than the initial statement. Katie speaks of a phenomenon that this process can create, which has been true in my own experience with it: “I don’t let go of my thoughts, I meet them with understanding— then they let go of me” (5). The questions and turnarounds of The Work generate an increased awareness of the effects of one’s beliefs. Just this awareness can be enough to cause a spontaneous dissolution or “letting go” of the belief or story being questioned, thus moving the inquirer into a condition of greater openness.

The Work has infinite applications— it can be used to question any kind of beliefs or prejudices. I'm inclined to think that the more such questioning occurs, the better. In my teaching thus far, I have only begun to experiment with its use. I can readily see potential value in asking my students to apply The Work to their thoughts about race, gender, and class, for example. I have not yet done this, though. What I have done so far is to ask them to question their thoughts about poetry.

The process goes like this: I inform them about the process of The Work. Then we fill out Judge-Your-Neighbor worksheets about poetry. I encourage them to follow Byron Katie's suggestion when filling out the sheets—be petty, be childish, don't hold back. I do the process along with them—I have plenty of stressful beliefs about poetry and specific poets or poems that merit questioning. The thoughts we come up with are of this order:

I don't like poetry because it's pretentious.

Poetry is boring.

Poetry sucks.

Poetry takes too much time to read.

Poetry should have a definite meaning.

Poetry should not be confusing.

I never want to have to memorize a poem again.

Then I split the students into pairs and have them take turns leading one another through the questions and turn-arounds. When we've finished the exercise and I ask students about their experience, they often report to me that they feel more open, less resistant, more interested in reading poetry.

Sometimes I'll invite a brave student to let me facilitate them through the questions and turn-arounds in front of the rest of the class. I became convinced of the value of doing The Work with my students on their thoughts about poetry during one such dialogue with a student named Joe. The dialogue, as I remember it (it happened a few years ago) went something like this:

Me: So Joe—what's the stressful thought?

Joe: Poetry takes too much time to read.

Me: Poetry takes too much time to read—is it true?

Joe: Yeah, it does.

Me: Can you absolutely know that it takes too much time to read?

Joe: Yes.

Me: And how do you react—what happens when you believe that, and you're assigned to read some poetry for this class?

Joe: I don't do it. I put it off.

Me: So who would you be without that thought, that poetry takes too much time to read?

Joe: I'd spend all my time reading poetry. I wouldn't do anything else.

It'd be so stupid. It would take over my life.

After a moment Joe blushed—it seemed that he'd really heard himself say what he'd just said—that if he didn't believe reading poetry took too much time, he'd spend *all* his time reading poetry. I don't know exactly what Joe's experience of this was, but to me it looked like a young man realizing that his resistant attitude to reading poetry was actually a reaction to a sense of

poetry's power and allure—an implicit understanding that if he didn't resist it, poetry would take over his life and perhaps render him unable to fulfill the roles which he occupied—baseball player for the University team, business major.

4.1 ENTERING POSSIBILITY VIA RESISTANCE ITSELF

There are of course many forms of resistance to reading a particular poem that a student might experience, aside from a general aversion to the affective dimension of poetry. It could be argued that some of these resistances are themselves important and justified, not needing to be dissolved or questioned. I saw a potential instance of this kind of resistance in the response that a student named Tunmise Layiwola in Reading the Soul of Poetry offered to a prompt that asked him to read “Song of Myself” contemplatively and receptively:

I refuse and reject the option to open my mind to this poem, it is not me. It is the genius of another, another who others have come to worship. I will not kneel before your greatness, for it is false. A delusion your masses have chosen to live and dwell in your shadow. I ask you not to speak to me yet you do. I run and run and yet you find the shortcut to me, grabbing at my heart, looking for my soul. You wish to converse with it, but I wish not. I hide from you and your deception. You come to me in demand and required attention. You force me upon you, reverse rape. Why must I speak to you? Others have fallen into your trap, but me never. I hide from your rain that covers the land. It will never reach me for I carry an umbrella of darkness, one that hides me from the world. You will kill my greatness before I let the world have it. My efforts are futile for

now, I must confront you. I will lose and you will love and I will love it, but she will die. She, who has been with me from the beginning, will be raped by you. Why do you do it, I ask? You reply, so as to preserve my existence.

We all write for survival, you address the future, the present the past. You who have let yourself have your way with you. You claim not to abase yourself but I do not believe your words. You lie, your words are death, creating life in me, why is this so? Why must I lay with you on the grass as the warm sun caresses our body? Our union is unholy, it is blasphemy to her. She hates me know for I am to become one with you, an unholy matrimony.

O' how sweet you make me feel, we are one once again your experiences transform me to a place now known to many. We dine together in the open moonlight as your words rock me to sleep. Your valvèd voice reaches me in ecstasy. I now lay with you; you have made my misery yours. I expected love, you gave me life. We share a bound unbroken, a spell has been cast that only your lord can break. I remember quiet nights in my room as I sat with you. You took me away, to a place between the lines, the hidden road. We shared moments unspoken, you gave me your words and I my soul. It is without a doubt a fair barter. For I gain more than I lost. The world can hate me, kick me, laugh at me, but I will never betray you. None will see you the way we met it. For you are uncanny and amazing, spectacular and illustrious, you and I have become one in unholy matrimony. Let it last forever.

Allow me to attempt to trace some of the complex movements of Layiwola's response in order to understand how this instance of resistance enters Possibility. He begins with a flat and vehement refusal, invoking his own self-reliance: "I refuse and reject the option to open my mind

to this poem, it is not me. It is the genius of another, another who others have come to worship.” He continues by defending himself against the relentless onslaught of Whitman’s advance: “I ask you not to speak to me yet you do. I run and run and yet you find the shortcut to me, grabbing at my heart, looking for my soul. You wish to converse with it, but I wish not.” The stakes of his evasion rise toward the end of the first paragraph with the appearance of a loyal “she” who is threatened by rape from Whitman.

Concurrently, Layiwola’s relationship with Whitman becomes more layered— “love” comes into the picture: “My efforts are futile for now, I must confront you. I will lose and you will love and I will love it, but she will die. She, who has been with me from the beginning, will be raped by you.” Layiwola and Whitman then enter into “an unholy matrimony” which “is blasphemy to her.” In the final paragraph, the love relationship between Layiwola and Whitman surprisingly grows more intimate and seems to replace the bond between Layiwola and “she” as Layiwola now addresses Whitman using the same language with which Whitman addresses his soul in the opening of “Song of Myself”⁷: “Your valvèd voice reaches me in ecstasy. I now lay with you; you have made my misery yours. I expected love, you gave me life.” Finally, Layiwola concludes his response to Whitman with an expression of loyalty and devotion: “The world can hate me, kick me, laugh at me, but I will never betray you. None will see you the way we met

⁷ Whitman wrote: “I believe in you my soul . . . the other I am must / not abase itself to you, / And you must not be abased to the other. Loafe with me on the grass . . . loose the stop from / your throat, / Not words, not music or rhyme I want . . . not custom or lecture, not even the best, / Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.” (7)

it. For you are uncanny and amazing, spectacular and illustrious, you and I have become one in unholy matrimony. Let it last forever.”

My initial impression, upon reading Layiwola’s multi-faceted response to the prompt, was to gather that he had declined to use the occasion of his reading “Song of Myself” as an entrance into the receptive condition of Possibility. Somehow, the passion of his refusal in the opening lines blunted my ability to see the imagined love relationship that emerged in the conclusion. I can now perceive that the response Layiwola gave to my invitation to read Whitman slowly and receptively actually uses resistance itself as a means of entering Possibility. The response performs a refusal that melts into a surrender which is all the more rich for the fact that it begins as such a heated denial—a denial so hot that even the intensely professed surrender, intimacy, and loyalty that come at the conclusion of the response can’t help but be cast into an ironic light by the fact that they are preceded by an initial refusal of perhaps even greater intensity. In short, Layiwola’s unambivalent expressions of hatred and love seem to cancel one another out, resulting in an equivocal and ambivalent response. This response may or may not enter Possibility via the acceptance of Whitman’s poetic gift (depending on how one reads the sincerity of the professed surrender) but it does enter Possibility via the imagination of a vexed encounter with Whitman. In this way, the liminal condition that Layiwola creates through his equivocal response is one which puts him at a distance from both from obedience to my teacherly instruction and also from Whitman’s offering. In the threat of “rape” that appears in Layiwola’s narrative I discern an element of the agonistic struggle between a young poet and a predecessor made familiar by the arguments of Harold Bloom, and I also see Layiwola’s intuition of the danger of invasion and corruption which poetry affords—a danger great enough that because of it Socrates wished to ban poetry from the Republic.

Layiwola's response to prompts throughout the semester evidenced varieties of similarly complex resistance and refusal. Through reading his work, I came to understand that unadulterated receptivity and hospitality to a given poem are not the only means by which one can use that poem for a starting place of poetic inquiry

5.0 CONSIDERING THE RESULTS OF POETIC STRATEGY AS DEPLOYED IN POETIC INQUIRY: NEW THOUGHT, AESTHETICAL IDEA, SYMBOL AND IMAGE

Poetic strategies successfully used as tools of the second movement of poetic inquiry result in the generation of something specific and valuable which has properties that distinguish it from the results of poetic strategies deployed only for entertainment or pleasure: in “The Poet” Emerson calls this result a “new thought”⁸; Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment*, calls it an “aesthetical Idea”; William Butler Yeats in his essay “The Symbolism in Poetry” calls it the symbol; Jane Hirshfield, following Ezra Pound in *The ABCs of Reading*, refers to it as an “image.” These results are usually the product of a variety of poetic strategies deployed simultaneously. In other words, the best fruit of poetic inquiry is not solely trope or gesture or fiction (if any such thing could be said to exist) but a combination of these. It’s useful to first look to Hirshfield for an explanation of what this phenomenon is and what it does, since her idiom is closest to ours:

In a good image, something previously unformulated (in the most literal sense) comes into the realm of the express. Without precisely this image [new thought, symbol, aesthetical Idea] we feel, the world’s store of truth would be diminished, and conversely, when a writer brings into language a new image that is fully right, what is knowable in existence expands. (18)

⁸ By “new thought” Emerson seems to denote a “new psychic experience.”

Hirshfield here comments on the ability of the image to fulfill attempts to seek truth. Importantly, Hirshfield suggests that the nature of the answer given to the seeking by the image (i.e., the fruit of a successful poetic inquiry) is not just information, but actually a movement or expansion in the field of “what is knowable in existence.”

Emerson also speaks extensively to the expansive quality of this phenomenon (which he calls a “new thought”):

The sign and credentials of the poet [i.e., poetic inquirer] are that he announces that which no man foretold. He is the true and only doctor; he knows and tells; he is the only teller of news, for he was present and privy to the appearance which he describes. He is a beholder of ideas and an utterer of the necessary and causal. For we do not speak now of men of poetical talents, or of industry and skill in metre, but of true poet. [...] For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form. The poet has a new thought; he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet. (290-291)

Here we see Emerson stressing that the fruit of a poetic inquiry (a new thought) differs from merely versified language because it adverts something fresh, it “announces that which no man foretold.”

Emerson also gives urgent praise to the ability of the fruit of poetic inquiry to expand the horizons of what can be known. He refers to the expansion as a kind of “liberation” (302):

There is good reason why we should prize this liberation [afforded by the poet / poetic inquirer]. The fate of the poor shepherd, who, blinded and lost in the snowstorm, perishes in a drift within a few feet of his cottage door, is an emblem of the state of man. On the brink of the waters of life and truth, we are miserably dying. The inaccessibility of every thought but that we are in, is wonderful. What if you come near to it; you are as remote as when you are nearest as when you are farthest. Every thought is also a prison; every heaven is also a prison. Therefore we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode or in an action or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains and admits us to a new scene. (302)

Here we find why it is we should value the fruit of poetic inquiry: because it “unlocks our chains and admits us to a new scene.” Without it, we stay mired in the known, “miserably dying” like a poor shepherd lost in a blizzard. Even if we feel comfortable within the scheme of our present perception, Emerson reminds us that “every heaven is also a prison”; which is to say, there is something binding and confining about anything less than the fullest truth, and truth-as-unveiling is something that is always coming to be, something which requires fresh attention and articulation.

5.1 POETIC STRATEGIES, NON-ENCOMPASSABILITY AND THE SOUL

In order to further understand the quality of poetic inquiry's fruit, it is worth thinking more about Emerson's claim that a new thought articulated by a true poem [i.e. a work which successfully uses poetic strategies in service of poetic inquiry] is something "so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing." This claim bears much in common with the insight that Kant expressed in *The Critique of Judgment* in a section titled "Of the faculties of the mind that constitute genius" in which he reflects on the idea of "spirit" in art and poetry. This is the section where Kant introduces his notion of "the aesthetical Idea." As we will see, it appears that both Kant's "aesthetical Idea" and Emerson's "new thought" are bound up with the notion of "spirit" or "soul." We should note that the word Kant uses in the passage I cite below (*Geist*) which has been below translated as "spirit" may also be translated as "soul." Also, in the above-quoted passage from Emerson, he spoke of "spirit" as a quality related to the new thought, but elsewhere, as we will see, Emerson speaks much more often of "soul" in this connection. As far as I can tell, Emerson did not denote anything different in his usages of "spirit" or "soul" but rather, these terms appear to be synonyms in his deployment. Kant writes:

We say of certain products of which we expect that they should at least in part appear as beautiful art, they are without *spirit* [a footnote from the translator here reads: "In English we would rather say 'without soul': but I prefer to translate *Geist* consistently by *spirit*, to avoid the confusion of it with *Seele*]; although we find nothing to blame in them on the score of taste. A poem may be very neat and elegant, but without spirit. A history may be exact and well arranged, but without spirit. A festal discourse may be solid and at the same time elaborate, but without spirit. Conversation is often not devoid

of entertainment, but yet without spirit: even of a woman we say that she is pretty, an agreeable talker, and courteous, but without spirit. What then do we mean by spirit?

Spirit, in an aesthetical sense, is the name given to the animating principle of the mind. But that whereby this principle animates the soul, the material which it applies to that [purpose], is that which puts the mental powers purposively into swing, *i.e.* into such a play as maintains itself and strengthens the [mental] powers in their exercise.

Now I maintain that this principle is no other than the faculty of presenting *aesthetical Ideas*. And by an aesthetical Idea I understand that representation of the Imagination which occasions much thought, without, however, any definite thought, *i.e.* any *concept*, being capable of being adequate to it; it consequently cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language. – We easily see that it is the counterpart (pendant) of a *rational Idea*, which conversely is a concept to which no *intuition* (or representation of the Imagination) can be adequate.

[...]

Such representations of the Imagination we may call *Ideas*, partly because they at least strive after something which lies beyond the bounds of experience, and so seek to approximate to a presentation of concepts of Reason (intellectual Ideas), thus giving to the later the appearance of objective reality—but especially because no concept can be fully adequate to them as internal intuitions. The poet ventures to realize to sense, rational Ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, hell, eternity, creation, etc.; or even if he deals with things of which there are examples in experience—*e.g.* death, envy and all vices, also love, fame, and the like—he tries, by means of Imagination, which emulates the play of Reason in its

quest after a maximum, to go beyond the limits of experience and to present them to Sense with a completeness of which there is no example in nature. It is, properly speaking, in the art of the poet, that the faculty of aesthetical Ideas can manifest themselves in its full measure. But this faculty, considered in itself, is properly only a talent (of the Imagination).

If now we place under a concept a representation of the Imagination belonging to its presentation, but which occasions solely by itself more thought than can ever be comprehended in a definite concept, and which therefore enlarges aesthetically the concept itself in an unbounded fashion—the Imagination is here creative, and it brings the faculty of intellectual Ideas (the Reason) into movement; i.e. a movement, occasioned by a representation, towards more thought (though belonging, no doubt, to the concept of the object) than can be grasped in the representation or made clear. (188 – 120 Kant)

So we see that for Kant, the “aesthetical Idea” is identical with the “spirit” or “soul” in a work of art, just as for Emerson the “new thought” of a true poem is like “the spirit of a plant or an animal.”

Kant’s explanation that “by an aesthetical Idea I understand that representation of the Imagination which occasions much thought, without, however, any definite thought, *i.e.* any *concept*, being capable of being adequate to it” leads him to the insight that the aesthetical Idea “brings the faculty of intellectual Ideas (the Reason) into movement; i.e. a movement, occasioned by a representation, towards more thought (though belonging, no doubt, to the concept of the object) than can be grasped in the representation or made clear.” This insight of Kant’s reminds us of Hirshfield’s claim that by the putting-forth of “a new image that is fully

right, what is knowable in existence expands.” We should remember that the kind of “knowability” which Hirshfield is talking about is not rational veracity but extra-rational intuition. Both Hirshfield and Kant are emphasizing the way the fruit of poetic inquiry engenders a movement which cannot be rationally understood, but which thereby “enlarges the concept in an unbounded fashion” thus expanding what we can conceive.

It’s interesting to note that in Kant’s discussion, the fruit of poetic inquiry (the aesthetical Idea) has a quality of irresolvability: it is moving in that it “puts the mental powers purposively into swing” in such a way that they cannot settle upon any singular definite concept. These same qualities are ones that Yeats ascribes to the poetic symbol in his essay “The Symbolism of Poetry.” There, he describes the symbol as both “indefinable” and “moving”:

In "Symbolism in Painting," I tried to describe the element of symbolism that is in pictures and sculpture, and described a little the symbolism in poetry, but did not describe at all the continuous indefinable symbolism which is the substance of all style.

There are no lines with more melancholy beauty than these by Burns:--

The white moon is setting behind the white wave,
And Time is setting with me, O!

and these lines are perfectly symbolical. Take from them the whiteness of the moon and of the wave, whose relation to the setting of Time is too subtle for the intellect, and you take from them their beauty. But, when all are together, moon and wave and whiteness and setting Time and the last melancholy cry, they evoke an emotion which cannot be evoked by any other arrangement of colours and sounds and forms. We may

call this metaphorical writing, but it is better to call it symbolical writing, because metaphors are not profound enough to be moving, when they are not symbols, and when they are symbols they are the most perfect of all, because the most subtle, outside of pure sound, and through them one can best find out what symbols are. (241 Yeats)

It seems that Yeats makes a distinction between “metaphor” and “symbol” in order to emphasize something we have already acknowledged: poetic devices (including trope, the category which houses “metaphor”) can be deployed in a way that does not inquire, that does not uncover and share a fresh experience of truth.

The poet Stephen Dobyns, in his essay “Metaphor and the Authenticating Act of Memory” like Kant, also invokes non-encompassability as a virtue of poetry, and sides with Yeats in deciding to term that which embodies this virtue as “symbol” rather than just “metaphor”:

A metaphor consists of the object half and the image half. The image half is most successful when it is open-ended or when the mind cannot fully encompass it: that is, when it creates the impression that it could give additional meaning each time the reader returns to it. Compare, for example, the stale metaphor ‘as quiet as a mouse’ with:

Quiet
like a house where the witch
has just stopped dancing.

When it is open-ended, the image works like a symbol, which in its simplest form is something that represents more than its literal meaning. The witch’s dance is not described and, while we may have some idea of it, we cannot encompass it,

nor what the house is like without it, except that it is wonderfully quiet. In a similar way, the symbol of the cross can be to some degree understood but it cannot be encompassed, while the meaning of a stop sign, like the quietness of a mouse, can be. This difference is partly the difference between sign and symbol, and clearly the image of a mouse to represent quiet approaches being a sign. So it would seem that the image half of the metaphor has the greatest possibility of touching the reader the more closely it works as symbol. (14 Dobyns)

I don't wish, as Yeats might, to assign the name "symbol" to metaphors that successfully poetically inquire and the name "metaphor" to metaphors that don't—as such a distinction strikes me as perhaps too difficult to maintain. I quote from Yeats and Dobyns to show that they are also thinking about something which poetry at its best can do—offer a truth that's not compassable by the rational mind (or by what Lewis Hyde calls "the brain that divides" [214]), something which Emerson and Kant and Hirshfield are also thinking about.

I feel it's important to appreciate this quality of non-encompassability in the fruit of poetic inquiry (by whatever name we choose to call it – image, new thought, aesthetical Idea, symbol—from here on I will use Emerson's term "new thought") because to do so allows us to reflect on an important property of the way this fruit offers "answers" of truth for contemplation: it answers with un-encompassable answers. In other words, it is *moving*, setting the faculties purposively into swing: it gives answers that raise further questions, answers that question us as readers. In this sense, to read a work which is the fruit of poetic inquiry is *to be questioned*. Hirshfield, at the conclusion of an essay entitled "The Question of Originality" remarks on the way that the fruit of poetic inquiry, itself the product of "the attention of questioning" (or what we are calling Possibility) can subsequently ask further questions of us as readers:

To look closely with the attention of questioning changes everything. It is, if undertaken fully, revolutionary. It is what Rainer Maria Rilke's 'Archaic Torso of Apollo' is about, with its famous last sentence:

We cannot know this legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,

gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast's fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

(trans. Stephen Mitchell)

Do not think it an accident that it is Apollo, patron god of poetry, at whose figure Rilke looks. The activity of poetry is to tell us we must change our lives. It does

this by posing again and again a question that cannot be answered except with our whole being—body, speech, and mind. What is the nature of this moment? Poetry asks, and we have no rest until the question is answered. (52-53)

I hope it is clear that Hirshfield's phrasing of the central question of poetic inquiry, "What is the nature of this moment?" is synonymous with what I have described as contemplative truth-seeking. I have chosen my particular phrasing of this dimension of the process above the one that Hirshfield offers because my phrasing makes explicit that the issue of "truth" is at stake. I find it useful to foreground the issue of truth as the central concern of poetic inquiry because to do so allows me to better understand the relationship between what Kant and Emerson both refer to as the un-encompassable "spirit" or "soul" in great poetry and the work of poetic inquiry. I make this connection because Emerson so powerfully highlights the relationship of soul to truth and to genius in his essay "The Over-Soul," in the passage we previously examined for its relationship to Heidegger's thought about the way Being is sung in the song of the poets. In this passage, Emerson offers that "The soul is the perceiver and revealer of truth" which offers us hints of its presence in and through form ("in conversation, in reveries, in remorse, in times of passion, in surprises, in the instruction of dreams"):

If we consider what happens in conversation, in reveries, in remorse, in times of passion, in surprises, in the instructions of dreams, wherein often we see ourselves in masquerade, -- the droll disguises only magnifying and enhancing a real element, and forcing it on our distinct notice, -- we shall catch many hints that will broaden and lighten into knowledge of the secret of nature. All goes to show that the soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty,

but a light; is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the intellect and the will; is the background of our being, in which they lie, -- an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed. From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all. A man is the facade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide. What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not, as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresents himself. Him we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend. When it breathes through his intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love. And the blindness of the intellect begins, when it would be something of itself. The weakness of the will begins, when the individual would be something of himself. All reform aims, in some one particular, to let the soul have its way through us; in other words, to engage us to obey. (238)

Thus from Emerson's discussion we understand that "soul" is a term for the elusive extra-rational truth, for "the background of our being." If we allow that this kind of soul has something to do with the quality of "soul" or "spirit" that Emerson and Kant both find at work in the fruits of poetic inquiry ("new thought" or "the aesthetical Idea," respectively) then we begin to suspect that new thoughts or aesthetical Ideas are soulful or spirited because they are somehow in a specific kind of strong relationship with the soul itself (something which I will shortly discuss in greater detail). They are works of genius because they are forms that are allowing the soul to "breathe" or "flow" through them to a significant degree. We can surmise that when Emerson mentions "droll disguises" present "in conversation, in reveries, in remorse, in times of passion, in surprises, in the instruction of dreams" he points to the presence of poetic strategies at work in

all of those phenomena, poetic strategies which can sometimes act as automatic or unconscious tools of poetic inquiry which through their indirection or “masquerade” succeed in “magnifying and enhancing a real element, and forcing it on our distinct notice.”

We should note that Emerson’s discussion of soul throughout his oeuvre is necessarily slippery and circular, as the soul itself is. No certain definitions or conclusions about it emerge, only hints and startling intuitions. As we gather from the passage I have quoted above, it’s always approached indirectly, caught from behind, seen sideways.

Clearly, the kind of “soul” which Emerson discusses is not identical with any conventional religious or dogmatic understanding of the term. The literary theorist Richard Poirier, in his argument concerning the centrality of the Emersonian tradition in American writing, *Poetry and Pragmatism*, comments on Emerson’s distinctive discourse of “soul” as it appears in “Circles” and “Self-Reliance”:

Even though the ‘soul’ in “Circles” is equated with the ‘heart,’ it is not to be imagined as an entity; it is more nearly a function, and yet no determination is made as to when the function occurs or from where it emanates. The soul has no determinable there or then, no here or now; rather, as his italics insist [in “Self-Reliance”] it only “*becomes*,” only promises to make its presence known. That is, the soul appears or occurs only as something we feel compelled to live into or move toward *as if* it were there; it is like James’s ‘will to believe,’ it hints at Stevens’s ‘supreme fiction,’ ... In any case for Emerson the soul always awaits us. ... His description of the activity of the soul asks to be read as an allegory, in which the movements of the soul in its circles represent the movements of creative energy in his sentences and paragraphs. He is saying that his own acts

of composition, the very efforts at non-conformity that result in his tropings of previous truths—that these fill him with apprehensions about encirclement and fixity. How is one to cope with this situation without collapsing into silence? The answer lies, I think, in the phrase “the soul *becomes*.” Note that ‘the soul’ is first named as if, with its definite article, it were an entity; note, too, that its realization as an entity is immediately and forever delayed, its presence becomes transferred to an ever elusive future, by the word ‘*becomes*.’ The soul never “becomes” a thing or a text; it exists in the action of becoming. (23-28)

Poirier’s observation that the Emersonian soul is “not to be imagined as an entity” seems especially valuable to me, as does his recognition that for Emerson, nothing about the soul is fixed or final: the soul “is” not identical with any phenomenon or perception; instead, “it exists in the action of becoming.” Poirier’s insight that Emerson linguistically performs for us the process of the soul when in “Self-Reliance” he uses the transitive verb “becomes” as an intransitive end-in-itself to dramatize the soul’s happening importantly guides us to appreciate the great degree to which the soul’s emergence in language is key to the Emersonian conception of it.

In the 1990s, the depth psychologist Thomas Moore popularized Emersonian ideas about the soul in his best-selling self-help guide, *The Care of the Soul*. In his introduction to that book, we find Moore interweaving the Emersonian conception of the elusive soul with Kant’s theory of *Geist* in art:

It is impossible to define precisely what the soul is. Definition is an intellectual enterprise anyway; the soul prefers to imagine. We know intuitively that soul has to do with genuineness and depth, as when we say

certain music has soul or a remarkable person is soulful. When you look closely at the image of soulfulness, you see that it is tied to life in all its particulars—good food, satisfying conversation, genuine friends, and experiences that stay in the memory and touch the heart. Soul is revealed in attachment, love, and community, as well as in retreat on behalf of inner communing and intimacy. (xi)

Moore's understanding that the soul as "tied to life in all its particulars" mirrors Emerson's observation in "The Oversoul" that we may sense the soul "in conversation, in reveries, in remorse, in times of passion, in surprises, in the instructions of dreams." The soul is something that is not able to be singled out and distilled from other experiences: it is inevitably incarnate, always stirring and glimmering.

5.2 AN EXAMPLE OF POETIC INQUIRY FROM *LEAVES OF GRASS*

The matter of soul strikes me as important not only because Emerson and Kant insist upon it as a key quality of the fruit of poetic inquiry, but because three of my favorite poetic inquirers (Dickinson, Whitman, and Rilke) comment extensively on the matter of the soul in their work.

In order to further illustrate the way in which the fruit of successful poetic inquiry creates un-encompassable new thoughts for the reader (thus drawing the reader at least temporarily\herself into a condition of Possibility and thus offering an opening which, as we've seen, Emerson calls "liberation") via the deployment of poetic strategies in service of a

contemplative search for truth, I want to offer a reading of a famous section from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" in *Leaves of Grass*:

A child said, What is the grass? Fetching it to me
with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know
what it is any more than he.
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of
hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrance designedly
dropped,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners,
that we may see and remark, and say Whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child the produced
babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and
narrow zones,

Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff. I give them
the same, I receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of
graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young
men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved
them;
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring
taken soon out of their mothers' laps,
And here you are the mothers' laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of
old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of
mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues!
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of
mouths for nothing.

(8-10 Whitman)

In this passage, Whitman dramatizes for us the performance of a poetic inquiry which allows us to have some insight into the process. First, we note that the questioning starts from a condition of Possibility: “A child said, What is the grass? Fetching it to me / with full hands; / How could I answer the child? . . . I do not know / what it is any more than he.” Whitman’s acknowledgement of his ignorance in the face of the child’s question signals that he’s in the condition of Possibility.

From the position of Possibility, of acknowledgment that he does not “know” what the grass is (i.e., that the ordinary answer actually tells nothing about the deep truth of the grass), Whitman launches an inquiry. Let us pause to consider the poetic strategies at work in the inquiry, one by one. First, there’s gesture: Whitman deploys devices like anaphora (“Or I guess. . . Or I guess . . . It may be . . . It may be . . .”) and alliteration (“A scented gift and remembrance designedly dropped”; “the faint red roofs of mouths”) and in doing so generates a diction that has a quality of playful excess. Then, there’s drama: the speaker of the poem, who I am calling “Whitman” is a persona, an invention. Third, there’s fiction, at least to the degree that we have no way of knowing—nor any need to know for the sake of the poetic effect, whether or not a child really asked “What is the grass?” Finally, the passage is rich with trope, primarily metaphor (“it is the handkerchief of the lord”; “the grass is itself a child”; “it is a uniform hieroglyphic”;) and irony (“It may be you are from old people, or from offspring / taken too soon out of their mothers’ laps, / And here you are the mothers’ laps”; “The grass is very dark to be from the white heads of / old mothers, / Darker than the colorless beards of old men, / Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths”).

I offer that Whitman’s metaphor identifying grass as “the beautiful uncut hair of graves” is a new thought, an aesthetical Idea. There’s something about it which rational thought cannot

encompass. The metaphor raises the question: how is grass the beautiful uncut hair of graves? And in doing so it invites us to imagine the graves not just as holding human bodies but as somehow *being* human bodies, bodies with beautiful hair—hair nurtured and made to grow by the very decay of the bodies in the grave, which leads into the observation of an irony: “This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of / old mothers, / Darker than the colorless beards of old men.” The observed irony serves to expand upon the initial metaphor. Thus the metaphor circles us rapidly through a constellation of associations which are irresolvable and irreducible in their interrelationship: beauty, death, decay, life. In other words, the metaphor is *moving*, it sets the faculties into swing; it allows something “previously unformulated” to come “into the realm of the expressed”; it has soul.

Through Whitman’s deployment of poetic strategies in the service of poetic inquiry, he succeeds in fulfilling a project which Emerson cited as the definition of a worthwhile text in “The American Scholar”: “the transmutation of life into truth.” Through Whitman’s inquiry, the grass comes to evoke and stand for an aspect of truth, it becomes a symbol in the profound esoteric sense that Emerson used the term in “The Poet” (which is probably also the sense in which Yeats meant to use the word, but perhaps did not succeed as well as Emerson in communicating what he meant by it).

Emerson’s consideration of this transmutative work rests on the insight we noted before as the hallmark of imaginative perception—the realization that there is an “instant dependence of form upon soul” (287) or that “The Universe is the externization of the soul” (293). This dependence means that every “sensuous fact” (288) embodies manifold elements of the soul’s truth and may be deployed as symbol of that truth: “Things admit of being used as symbols because nature is a symbol, in the whole, and in every part” (292). Ordinarily we overlook the

symbolic quality of the world because we are immersed in it and identified with it— the gift of the poet is to make us aware of our life as symbols amid symbols.

5.3 UNDERSTANDING SYMBOL AS THE PRODUCT OF AN ARRAY OF POETIC STRATEGIES IN SERVICE TO TRUTH

It is important to understand Emerson's theory of the symbol in order to gain a sense of the central importance he ascribed to the project of poetic inquiry as a kind of alchemical process necessary to human evolution. He writes in "The Poet":

The world being thus put under the mind for verb and noun, the poet is he who can articulate it. For though life is great, and fascinates and absorbs, and though all men are intelligent of the symbols through which it is named [i.e., words]; yet they cannot originally use them. We are symbols and inhabit symbols; workmen, work, and tools, words and things, birth and death, all are emblems; but we sympathize with the symbols, and being infatuated with the economical uses of things, we do not know that they are thoughts. The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception [i.e., imagination, or what we are calling Possibility, after Dickinson], gives them a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes and a tongue into every dumb and inanimate object. He perceives the independence of the thought on the symbol, the stability of thought, the accidentality and fugacity of the symbol. As the eyes of Lynceus were said to see through the earth, so the poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession. For through that better perception he stands one step nearer to things, and sees the

flowing or metamorphosis; perceives that thought is multiform; that within the form of every creature is a force impelling it to ascend into a higher form; and following with his eyes the life, uses the forms which express that life, and so his speech flows with the flowing of nature. All the facts of the animal economy, sex, nutriment, gestation, birth, growth, are symbols of the passage of the world into the soul of man, to suffer there a change and reappear a new and higher fact. (295-296)

In other words, from reading Emerson we gather that “symbol” is not just the name for a particularly successful metaphor (as Yeats perhaps misleadingly suggested) but rather a term which summarizes the successful deployment of an array of poetic strategies put to the service of causing some facet of the outer world to reveal a fact of the inner, or deep truth (i.e., “the transmutation of life into truth”). And actually, if we look at the example that Yeats gives of an excellent symbol, the lines from Burns, “The white moon is setting behind the white wave, / And Time is setting with me, O!” we find again a constellation of poetic strategies, and not simply metaphor, at work. We also locate the drama of a soliloquizing voice and the implied story of a life now at its decline.

It’s significant that these symbols which the poet sees and names are not fixed, they are part of a flowing “metamorphosis.... which does not stop” (300) and that this metamorphosis is what we are also calling a “transmutation”: “the passage of the world into the soul of man, to suffer there a change and reappear a new and higher fact” (296). The poetic inquirer is one who consciously, deliberately participates in this transformation and makes it apparent to others. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke memorably described the importance of the metamorphosis of world into symbol:

Nature and all of the objects of our daily use are preliminary and frail; as long as we are here, however, they are our possession and our friendship, accessories to our suffering and joy, just as they had been the intimates of our predecessors. It is thus our task not only not to malign and take down everything that is here but rather, because of the transience which we have in common with it, to comprehend and transform with an innermost consciousness these appearances and things. Transform? Yes, for it is our task to impress this provisional, transient earth upon ourselves so deeply, so agonizingly, and so passionately that its essence rises up again "invisibly" within us. *We are the bees of the invisible. We ceaselessly gather the honey of the visible to store it in the great golden hive of the Invisible.* (Rilke 23)

As Rilke explains, this seeing is itself transformative. He offers another, perhaps more vivid consideration of this same process of inquiry-as-transmutation in his novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. There, Brigge, a young Danish writer living in Paris, offers advice to himself about the project of poetic inquiry as a lifetime commitment:

... Ah, poems amount to so little when you write them too early in your life. You ought to wait and gather sense and sweetness for a whole lifetime, and a long one if possible, and then, at the very end, you might perhaps be able to write ten good lines. For poems are not, as people think, simply emotions (one has emotions early enough)—they are experiences. For the sake of a single poem you must see many cities, many people and Things, you must understand animals, must feel how birds fly, and know the gesture which small flowers make when they open in the morning. You must be able to think back to streets in unknown

neighborhoods, to unexpected encounters, and to partings you had long seen coming; to days of childhood whose mystery is still unexplained, to parents whom you had to hurt when they brought in a joy and you didn't pick it up (it was a joy meant for somebody else--); to childhood illnesses that began so strangely with so many profound and difficult transformations, to days in quiet, restrained rooms and to mornings by the sea, to the sea itself, to seas, to nights of travel that rushed along high overhead and went flying with all the memories of many nights of love, each one different from all the others, memories of women screaming in labor and of light, pale, sleeping girls who have just given birth and are closing again. But you must also have been beside the dying, must have sat beside the dead in the room with the open window and the scattered noises. And it is not yet enough to have memories. You must be able to forget them when they are many, and you must have the immense patience to wait until they return. For the memories themselves are not important. Only when they have changed into our very blood, into glance and gesture, and are nameless, no longer to be distinguished from ourselves—only then can it happen that in some very rare hour the first word of a poem arises in their midst and goes forth from them. (*Selected* 91)

Rilke, writing as Brigge, offers an insight which is key for understanding the difference between writing which expresses or evokes emotion or sensation using poetic strategy (among which we can count every kind of textual entertainment including graphic horror stories and pornography) and writing which is the fruit of poetic inquiry-- which Brigge here simply calls “poems”—writing which puts poetic strategies in the service of a kind of spiritual or emotional

truth rather than entertainment. Brigge observes “poems are not, as people think, simply emotions (one has emotions early enough)—they are experiences.” Brigge’s claim that “For the sake of a single poem you must see many cities, many people and Things, you must understand animals, must feel how birds fly, and know the gesture which small flowers make when they open in the morning” is a notion which makes explicit how much deeply pondered experience is necessary to fulfill the work of “transmuting life into truth” (Emerson’s description of poetic inquiry from “The American Scholar”). There’s so much raw stuff of life and so much contemplation that’s required in order to distill a small and potent quantity of truth (“ten good lines”) from that life in order to express it as an experience in poetic strategy. Any hastily written melodrama can prod our emotions; only writing which is the fruit of poetic inquiry offers an experience, which is to say, offers us the world as dipped in and transformed by the author’s consciousness. Yet we might observe that in the above passage Brigge figures the transmutation the world via poetic inquiry into symbol or poem (“experience”) as primarily an act that transforms the poet. Hirshfield comments that this kind of transformation affects not just the poet but the community touched by the poet’s transmutative work:

In writing lit by a liminal consciousness [i.e., Possibility], the most common words take on the sheen of treasure—transformed in meaning for the entire community because they have been dipped in the mind of openness and connection. (208)

So the poet (or poetic inquirer) is one who is able through Possibility to see the sensuous facts of life as symbols, and to name and express this seeing via poetic strategies in such a way that the symbolic quality of these facts becomes intelligible to others. As does Hirshfield,

Emerson also claims that this making-intelligible is a valuable act because it has a liberating effect on everyone who encounters it:

The metamorphosis (i.e. “the passage of the soul into higher forms” made apparent by the poet [297]) excites in the beholder an emotion of joy. The use of symbols has a certain power of emancipation and exhilaration for all men. We seem to be touched by a wand which makes us dance and run about happily, like children. We are like persons who come out of a cave or cellar into the open air. This is the effect on us of tropes, fables, oracles and all poetic forms. Poets are thus liberating gods. Men have really got a new sense, and found within their world another world, or nest of worlds; for, the metamorphosis once seen, we divine that it does not stop. What a joyful sense of freedom we have [...] when Plato calls the world an animal, and Timaeus affirms that the plants are also animals; or affirms a man to be a heavenly tree, growing with his root, which is his head, upward; and, as George Chapman, following him, writes,

‘So in our tree of man, whose nervie root
Ssprings in his top’;--

When Orpheus speaks of hoariness as ‘that white flower which marks extreme old Age’; when Proclus calls the universe the statue of the intellect; when Chaucer, in his praise of ‘Gentillesse,’ compares good blood in mean condition to fire, which, though carried to the darkest house betwixt this and the mount of Caucasus, will yet hold its natural office and burn as bright as if twenty thousand men did it behold; when John saw, in the Apocalypse, the ruin of the world through evil, and the stars fall from heaven as the fig tree casteth her untimely fruit; when

Aesop reports the whole catalogue of common daily relations through the masquerade of birds and beasts; we take the cheerful hint of the immortality of our essence and its versatile habit and escapes, as when the gypsies say of themselves ‘it is vain to hang them, they cannot die.’

Thus Emerson illustrates that various tropes or symbolic expressions ventured by diverse poetic inquirers all have the effect of giving “the cheerful hint of the immortality of our essence” or an intimation of the soul’s truth. These intimations of the soul’s becoming, of its metamorphosis in and through forms, are valuable because our tendency is to remain attached to and identified with the forms of our existence (including our thoughts, of which every one is also a prison), to a degree that we forget that these forms, these present thoughts, are not ultimately true. Through imaginative perception (Possibility) and symbolic articulation through poetic strategy which arises from that perception, the poetic inquirer offers forth “a new thought,” a fresh insight into the truth which has the virtue of drawing us out of our habitual or conventional understanding and into a felt freedom. This is the importance and value of poetic inquiry.

Hirshfield also expresses this importance and value with powerful eloquence in “Poetry and the Mind of Indirection”:

Poetry steals its way into meaning; by the time the intruder is recognized, the task is already accomplished. A poem is a detour we willingly subject ourselves to, a trick surprising us into the deepened vulnerability we both desire and fear. Its strategies of beauty, delay, and deception smuggle us past the border of our own hesitation. There is reason to fear: a great poem, like a great love, challenges our solitude, our conceptions, the very ground of being. Encountering such a poem, we tremble a little as we enter its gates. But the end, as in love, is to

know and feel what could not be known or felt by any path less demanding.

(126)

Hirshfield figures poetry itself as an invader and poetic strategies as smugglers which take us “past the border of our own hesitation.” The choice to figure poetry and poetic strategies as criminals serves to underscore the outlaw nature of an activity which circumvents reason, and with it, the carefully built protections we maintain around the borders of our self and the known world.

5.4 THE SECOND MOVEMENT OF POETIC INQUIRY IN THE CLASSROOM

Both Emerson and Rilke’s description of the process by which poetic inquirers generate liberating new thoughts by using symbolic language to make intelligible the ever-unfolding metamorphoses of the soul through form make the endeavor sound rather impossibly elevated. I agree with them that this work, when done at its best level, is one of profound intensity and vast revelation. I also think that versions of this same work can have value on a smaller scale when undertaken by persons who may regard themselves as somewhat less than “liberating gods” or even “bees of the invisible.” I also think it’s possible to guide people to partake of this process—and that this guiding is an important avenue for education to take.

Creative writing classes as they are currently taught are already teaching students to use the poetic strategies of gesture, drama, fiction and trope. What distinguishes poetic inquiry as an educational practice from creative writing as it is now understood is that poetic inquiry explicitly seeks to engage students in the use of poetic strategies as tools for discovering

contemplative truths (or, transcendently speaking, for making the metamorphosis of soul through form apparent). What makes matters somewhat complex is that the term “creative writing” may actually be traced to Emerson’s address “The American Scholar” and in that context, it actually *does* specifically connote writing which is the fruit of poetic inquiry (which, as I previously noted, is a synonym for “American scholarship”), but this original Emersonian context for the term has since been forgotten in institutional parlance and creative writing has come to mean any kind of writing which is not merely for purposive communication (technical, professional, academic, etc.) but which foregrounds poetic strategies instead. Accordingly, creative writing instruction commonly does not stress the pursuit of deep truth via poetic strategies so much as it focuses upon guiding students to improve their “craft,” i.e., the deployment of poetic strategies in and of themselves.

6.0 ON READING THE SOUL OF POETRY

I framed Reading the Soul of Poetry itself as an inquiry about what poetic inquiry might be. This can be seen most clearly throughout the course description, and perhaps most especially in the last question it raises:

Though continuously given popular approval in many arenas, soul-centered engagement with poetry and poetics has not previously enjoyed widespread acceptance within the modern secular research university; however, this mode of engagement has a great intellectual heritage stretching (at least) from Plato's Socrates in Ancient Greece to Ralph Waldo Emerson in nineteenth-century New England.

In this course we will examine important texts in the history of poetics which theorize and / or perform the relationship of poetry to the soul. We will practice intensive (rather than extensive) reading of poetry, a mode of reading traditionally suggested as a means of expanding the soul's experience of poetry. We will engage in classroom exercises and experiments designed to create an atmosphere conducive to soulful response, expression, and evolution. We will expand our ability to write sensitively and articulately by practicing thinking-*with* poetry.

This course has a distinctly Transcendentalist inspiration in all of its elements. In keeping with this inspiration, the overall tone of our activities will be one of festive optimism intended to facilitate an elevated consciousness in our engagement with poetry

and with each other. We will attend to and experiment with the power that Emerson claimed great poetry possesses: the power to alter and expand our awareness for the better, to liberate our thought and unite us to a larger conception of ourselves as interconnected beings.

Key questions of this course are: What is the soul? What is poetry? What is *poëisis*? Why would we want to think of ourselves as "souls"--or why not? What is the relationship of the soul to the imagination? What do we value in poetry? Can poetry harm the soul (as Plato's Socrates claimed)? How do we recognize something as "soulful" rather than as merely intellectual or emotional? How can we participate in intellectual community in a way that increases our capacity to experience life and one another? Do poems have souls? What happens when we think of our selves / souls as poems? What manners, attitudes and practices best foster positively transforming encounters with poems and with human beings?

In asking "What manners, attitudes and practices best foster positively transforming encounters with poems and with human beings?" I was posing the question "what are the attitudes and practices of poetic inquiry?" I wanted us to practice ways of reading and interacting with poems which would put us into relationship with poetry's "power to alter and expand our awareness for the better, to liberate our thought and unite us to a larger conception of ourselves as interconnected beings" or, in other words, to move us into the condition I am now calling Possibility.

On the first day of Reading the Soul of Poetry I sought, perhaps clumsily, to move us as a class into the condition of Possibility not via reading poetry (which we would practice later in the manner I have already described) but through a guided visualization and meditation. In an

exercise titled “Dwelling in Possibility” I invited the class to imagine that it was the last day and we were reflecting on our experience. I had them close their eyes and relax as I read to them the text of the exercise, which I reproduce below:

Fast-forward to December. We’re sitting here in 151 together with our eyes closed, our feet flat on the floor, our hands open on our laps. We sit breathing, quietly reflecting about our past semester. As we reflect, we notice how nice it feels now that the defenses we sometimes carry around with us, our nervousness or our cynicism, our arrogance or shyness, our doubt or our suspicion have all become very light and transparent and no longer separate us from one another or burden us at all. We notice how good it feels also, now that all the negative experiences we have ever had in past English classes or with reading and writing seem very distant, very remote and small. We sit marveling together in this reflective silence about how Reading Poetry turned out to be a magical, wondrous, and transformative class for ourselves and for everyone around us. Somehow, we each learned something that our hearts very much wanted to know. We came to have great respect for one another, and we enjoyed more fun than we would have thought possible. Breathing slowly and deeply, we remember how we watched one another take positive risks: intellectually, socially, emotionally, spiritually, artistically. We found that encountering poetry turned out to give us all that we ever secretly hoped it would and more. We discovered that we were natural geniuses when it came to reading and writing poetry and reading and writing stuff about poetry. We feel a tingle of pride and pleasure as we think of the joy which came to us during a flush of creative inspiration that struck while we wrote for a writing assignment. We remember days in class when individuals surprised us with the brilliance and tenderness of the work

they shared or the generosity they displayed while completing an experiment that we first thought was silly. We remember times when we surprised ourselves. We feel warm, deep satisfaction and relaxation with how far we've come as persons and as intellectuals during this semester. We feel unexpectedly, rather wildly pleased with ourselves and with everyone around us. We feel a confident ability to encounter the poetic in all its forms, to create the poetic in all its forms. We feel ourselves to be very compelling poems, and we can easily see the poetry sparkling all around us and around every one we meet. We sit breathing for a few moments, enjoying these happy memories.

Now, opening our eyes on this December afternoon, we take a few minutes to write about all the details of our recollections of our fantastic semester which so exceeded our initial expectations. We write about exactly what we've learned and how we've changed. We write about what we're proud to have contributed to the class via the assignments and experiments and Read-Arounds. We write about what we've discovered about ourselves and poetry and other people.

Arguably, this exercise does not so much invite students to a liminal state of imaginative perception as it invites them to have positive expectations about the class. (I collected the students' responses to this in-class writing and presented them to them on the actual last day of class and asked them to write about how their positive vision had or had not been fulfilled by the class.) Still, by asking students to envision "that the defenses we sometimes carry around with us, our nervousness or our cynicism, our arrogance or shyness, our doubt or our suspicion have all become very light and transparent and no longer separate us from one another or burden us at all" I was beginning to invite them to assume some of the undefended, surrendered, and

vulnerable qualities that Possibility (as I am now using the term, not just in the sense of positive expectation) requires.

6.1 CONSIDERING THE SOUL IN THE CLASSROOM

Soon after issuing this initial invitation to Possibility / positive expectation, I offered to the class our first writing prompt, which both sought to engage them in the work of articulating the deep truth via poetic strategy (i.e., the second movement of poetic inquiry) and also in getting them to help me discover what the process of poetic inquiry might be. Asking someone to describe what an experience of poetry-as-new-thought (in the “highest sense as anything which through its form has communicated to you some truth which liberates, expands, or elevates your perspective”) might have to do with the soul is in one way asking them to describe what poetry has to do with the deep truth— which is a way of asking “what might poetic inquiry be?” I reproduce the prompt below:

Read-Around Prompt: Poetry and the Soul

First, describe how you understand the term “soul.” What associations does the word invoke for you? Please be specific and in-depth. Do you think of catechism class... or rhythm & blues? Something in-between? Do you think of yourself as being a soul, as having a soul... or as being something other-than or not-related to “soul” at all?

Second, describe a specific time when you had an intense encounter with poetry. I’m talking about poetry in the deepest, highest sense as anything which through its form has communicated to you some truth which liberates, expands, or elevates your

perspective; I'm talking about any encounter which has opened your eyes and shown you a new vista. Poetry is not confined to written verses or even to art. How did this encounter begin? What state of mind were you in when it struck? Where did it take place? How has it affected you? Through what medium did it arrive? Relate all the sensual and emotional details of the experience. Your encounter with the deepest and highest poetry might have happened via a dream, a film, a song, a conversation, a religious ritual, a meal, a party, a solitary walk, a random sign, a new person, an old friend, a poem, a novel, a painting.... Or anywhere else. Poetry finds its way into our human experience through many surprising routes. When we recognize it and describe it we amplify its positive effect in our lives, we become more sensitive to it wherever it shows up, we invite more of it to come.

Would you say that this intense encounter with poetry affected your soul? If you would, please explain why. If you wouldn't, please explain why.

NOTE:

Your response to this prompt, as to all our Read-Around prompts, may take any generic form that you desire. You may write an autobiographical essay, a poem or series of poems, a fictional anecdote, or anything else.

This prompt, like most of our prompts, addresses itself to "you." It says, "describe a specific time when *you* had an intense encounter with poetry" (italics added for emphasis). In your written response to this prompt, you may imagine the "you" it addresses to be yourself as you usually regard yourself, or you may imagine it to be addressing some other character whom you will imaginatively inhabit, whose perspective

you will write from. You are in no way limited to factual autobiographical response, though you are welcome to choose that route.

I can now see that the note I gave to my students at the conclusion of this prompt was a gentle, tentative encouragement that they answer the questions the prompt raised about truth, poetry and the soul via poetic strategies (“a poem or a series of poems, a fictional anecdote”). I specifically offered to students the opportunity to use the poetic strategies of drama / persona (“In your written response to this prompt, you may imagine the ‘you’ it addresses to be yourself as you usually regard yourself, or you may imagine it to be addressing some other character whom you will imaginatively inhabit, whose perspective you will write from” and fiction (“You are in no way limited to factual autobiographical response”). One happy effect of the invitation to poetic strategy in this first prompt being so gentle and tentative was perhaps that it allowed room for students who felt more comfortable responding in a more prosaic fashion to do so, thus easing them into the work of the class (through prose consideration of poetry and soul) rather than dropping them directly into the practice of poetic strategies. I myself chose to respond in the form of an autobiographical essay (see Part 2).

Some students responded in a manner almost completely void of poetic strategy (I say “almost” since, language itself being “fossil poetry” [as Emerson reminds us in “The Poet”] no use of language can ever be entirely absent of poetic strategy). For example, Daniel Radin offered a definition of the soul that has an Aristotelian aridity:

My understanding of the soul is based on the assumption that the soul is a noun, spiritual in nature, and that it is the most intimate and pure thing an individual possesses. It’s what separates us from one another; each is our own exclusively. The soul is eternal, undying, and unalterable.

I am happy to report that Radin's willingness to step outside prosaic definition of the soul and to foray into symbolic utterance increased as the semester wore on— he thereby fulfilled a major aim of the poetic education in which I attempted to enlist him.

Other responses to this prompt startled me with the readiness with which they offered forth new thoughts by way of symbol. Molly Burkett wrote:

Soul begins as the sun disappears into rays of red, orange, and black-purple. When the pillows become my only vice and the night noises blend away into breathing rhythms and sleep sets like a sad disease.

The rest of Burkett's response, which I reproduced earlier, goes on to discuss dreaming and the relationship of dreams to the soul and poetic experience. Burkett's response was one instance where the student's work in Reading the Soul of Poetry helped to clarify for me what exactly the process of poetic inquiry (i.e., the relationship of poetic attitude and poetic strategy to deep truth or soul) might be. Burkett accomplished this in part by offering a metaphor that equates "soul" and "dream": "Soul begins as the sun disappears into rays of red, orange, and black-purple." This metaphor, as does the fruit of all poetic inquiry, offered to me a moving question: how is the soul a dream? What does the soul have to do with dreaming?

Similarly, Hannah Swysgood offered a moving free verse titled "SOUL" whose symbolic expression is dramatic and incisive:

Tingling.

Vibrating.

Pulsating.

Flowing.

A speck within.

A force beyond unique.

Recipe of self.

Sensational knowing.

Illuminating garden.

Energy to reap.

Infinity carried in an expendable womb.

Origin unknown.

Commonly divine.

Existing reborn beyond the tomb.

Eternally present.

Momentarily mine.

The lines “Sensational knowing. / Illuminating garden. / Energy to reap. / Infinity carried in an expendable womb” have a Blakean precision and sweep that strike me as remarkable and indeed incite in me the desire to “dance and run about happily” (as Emerson claims symbolic expressions are wont to do). For students such as Burkett and Swysgood who readily displayed a willingness and ability to participate in symbolic articulation, the work that we did together in the course functioned perhaps not as an introduction to poetic inquiry but rather as a deepening and making conscious, deliberate, and explicitly valued dimensions of this process in which they were already adept.

6.2 ENGAGING THE POETICAL SELF AS AN ACT OF POETIC INQUIRY

Soon after we shared our responses to the first writing prompt, I sought in another way to lead my students in the project of asking “What is the deep truth?” and answering via the use of poetic strategy. I invited them to “come to class dressed as your poetical, possible, highly improbable self.” This same experiment simultaneously acted as an invitation for them to enter the liminal condition of Possibility which is the necessary perspective of poetic inquiry. I reproduce the assignment below:

Experiment: Come to Class Dressed as Your Poetical, Possible, Highly Improbable Self

Rationale:

We practice reading “the written stuff” of poetry only because that stuff can be a tremendous help to us in learning to read the poetry that is ever-present within and without us.

To this end, we’re going to start our festivities by engaging with some of the poetry that we already are.

The poetic attitude attends to the possible and extravagant rather than to the actual or probable.

We have been trained to show up most of the time as our Prosaic, Probable, Conventional Selves. These Prosaic Selves have a lot of value: they allow us to be legible as “normal,” respectable persons in our society; they allow us to attract ready acceptance and approval as we move around the world. There’s only two big problems with our

Prosaic, Probable, Conventional Selves: 1) they are boring 2) they don't know how to read or write poetry.

Lurking just around the corners of our usual Prosaic, Probable, Conventional selves we all have Poetical, Possible, Highly Improbable Selves. These Poetical Selves intuitively understand, create, and respond to poetry because they fearlessly live in the sunlight under which the flowers of poetry grow—the light of imagination.

Our Poetical Selves are not fettered by demands to submit to conventions, to be “normal,” to raise no eyebrows. Instead, they're extravagant, playful, strange, mysterious, dramatic. They let their Freak Flags Fly, as Donovan would say. Poetical, Possible, Highly Improbable Selves are the Selves we make up for ourselves—they are the Selves we usually abandon because we've been told we're not allowed to be those things, we should “tone it down” and fit in.

Here, I invite you to show up for every meeting of the class as your liberated, Poetical Self.

Instructions:

Your task for Wednesday is to come *dressed* as your Poetical, Possible, Highly Improbable Self.

That's right. We're having a costume party!

In order to come dressed as your Poetical, Possible, Highly Improbable Self you of course will need to have some sense of what that Self could look like.

A good way to get in touch with the features of the Poetical Self is to ask, “How did I like to dress up when I was a little kid? What games did I like to play? When I played pretend, what did I pretend to be? What game of pretend did I most enjoy?”

It’s likely that as a child you pretended to be several things: I liked to be a witch, Wesley from *A Princess Bride*, a Greek Goddess, a gypsy, a Fairy Queen. My little brother liked to be Beast from *Beauty and the Beast*, Batman, Marilyn Monroe, and the Hulk.

Amongst the characters you liked to pretend to be when you were a little kid there’s very likely some character that still resonates with you. I invite you to choose that character and to totally dress up that way. You may not be able to find a full Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles costume on such short notice, but you can certainly find a Samurai headband.

On the other hand, you may have a new and current realization of the style of your Poetical Self, which may have nothing to do with your childhood. That’s fine. In any case, to inspire you, here is a list of adornments that Poetical Selves have been known to wear:

- Feather Headdresses
- Evening gowns
- Silk scarves
- Face paint, Body Paint
- Rhinestones
- Costume jewelry

Togas made from sheets

High Heels

Cowboy boots

Glitter

Fairy wings

Really long fake finger nails

Really long fake eyelashes

Super-hero capes

Mardi-Gras masks

Ballet slippers

Faux fur

Sunglasses

Fedoras

Zoot suits

Leather vests

Tiaras

Pirate eye patches

Sherlock Holmes-style monocles

Note: For more ideas about what to wear on Wednesday, do a Google image search for “glam rock” or “steam punk.”

Second Note: I'll bring a bunch of my own dress-up stuff to supplement any outfits that appear to my seasoned judgment less than satisfactorily Poetical. If you do not want to wear my waist-length blue sequined Liberace jacket, you had best come up with something awesome of your own.

I also gave students a writing prompt that asked them to “describe the birth of your Poetical, Possible, Highly Improbable Self” from the perspective of that self. When we met for class in our costumes, we took turns reading aloud our descriptions of these births.

The experiment of dressing up indirectly asked students to find modes of dress that symbolized truths of their individual beings. It also asked them to venture into a liminal state—a condition of (mild, temporary, playful) separation from their habitual or conventional identity brought about by setting aside their usual dress or augmenting it with strange accessories. The writing prompt gave an opportunity for students to further symbolize a truth of their being through a story of origin, a fable or myth.

Several students responded to the prompt with stories of their birth that fit a fairly classic mythological mold (see the responses by Sean Brodarick, Kathleen Carl, and Hannah Swysgood in Part 1, Week 2). Kara Helmick-Nelson, who came to class simply dressed in brown-colored clothes, responded to this prompt with a story that was not from the perspective of the Poetical Self, but was rather a third-person narration *about* the Poetical Self whose strangeness impressed me. In class conversation, she informed us that the name of the protagonist of her story is “Lump”:

Found to Loose

In no particular time, there existed a large city loft, inhabited by a tight knit group of travelers. Being dear friends, and each hosting a multitude of unnecessary talents (writing ancient Sumerian, painting copies of Van Gogh's work using only toes...etc...) everyone came and went as they pleased, taking weekends to months to explore the world.

In late April, phrenology specialist Brent Hoffman returned from Africa with a tiny form of unfired red clay. Setting it down on a copy of the "Tao Te Ching," he announced that this figure was a gift to the loft, a little something for all to enjoy. He smiled a crooked, coffee-stained grin, and walked out the door, bound for Iceland. No one at the loft ever saw Mr. Hoffman after that. It was a question of great debate if he had been killed by Vikings, or simply dropped by while everyone was sleeping. Either way, the rest of the travelers decided to build up his gift into a memorial.

From all over the world, the travelers brought more clay of salmon, ochre, and chestnut. There was moss from the edges of clear brooks, limestone from deep earth beds, and sediment of all kinds from beaches, caves, and deserts. These elements were smeared, rubbed, glued, and generally stuck to the once small figure. Over years, and then decades, the figure turned into a life sized monstrosity that had been moved from the coffee table, to an empty corner of the room. Soon, most forgot that it was about Brent Hoffman, and saw the misshapen dirt clump in the corner as a musing earthy project of old. Then, once the time came, the travelers picked up their bags, and relocated to a sunny retirement community in southern Florida. The loft remained empty for a year, and

the figure became lonely, and incredibly bored. The loft no longer felt right, and adorning an old polka dot dress that had been forgotten in a closet, she left.

Taking to the streets, she knew that somebody else was needed, someone to love, or even to like. Renting a place here and there, nothing was ever quite right. She felt homesick no matter where she was, who she was with, or what she was doing. Feeling quite depressed, about all this, she decided to have a night in with a stack of Brat Pack movies, and a whole lot of Chinese food. It was this time in which she opened up a fortune cookie, throwing the crumbly bits aside. It read "Keep looking. Enjoy what you find." Needless to say, as these stories go, this was life changing advice. And so, her outlook had changed, perhaps not fully in that moment, but it was a start, as she mused over the best way to hold her dumplings with chopsticks.

Helmick-Nelson's narrative subverts the notion that a magical or mythic birth must lead to a recognizably "poetical" self. Instead, we find an extraordinary birth followed by the emergence of a mundane self. By the conclusion of the brief story, Lump has become a rather recognizably mundane human: she feels lonely, rents movies, orders Chinese food, takes counsel from fortune cookies. Lump's ordinary loneliness belies her fantastic origins as "a tiny form of red clay" brought to a bohemian loft by a mysterious traveler and then subsequently built into a life-sized memorial to that traveler by the inhabitants of the loft. In the context of the assignment, Helmick-Nelson's story seems to suggest that the ordinary *is* the magic or poetic.

The qualities of resistance and subversion that I find in Layiwola's and in Helmick-Nelson's responses (i.e. both students creatively "pushed back" against the assignments I offered them) reminds me that refusal to meet expectations or demands of authority is an

important dimension of entering the liminal condition / Possibility and thus of engaging in poetic inquiry. I think of these lines of Dickinson's:

I'm ceded— I've stopped being Their's –
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished, using, now,
And they can put it with y Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading – too-
(Fr 353)

In this poem, Dickinson rejects the identity and expectations put upon her by family and society as she enters into a liminal mode of namelessness and spiritual self-reliance. On reflection, it's now clear to me that in order for some students to conduct their poetic inquiries (to enter a condition of enlarged freedom and imagination and then speak symbolically from that condition), they need to make space for themselves by rejecting, resisting, or subverting my teacherly expectations (explicit or implied).

6.3 INQUIRING ABOUT THE NATURE OF POETRY

The next prompt which I asked my students to complete, "Articulate Your Poetics," also sought, as did the first prompt on Poetry and the Soul, to enlist their help in thinking about what the important processes of poetry might be.

Read-Around Prompt: Articulate Your Poetics

Consideration

In this class so far, we've engaged in practices designed to raise our awareness of the poetic in ourselves and in our reading. We've endeavored to receive the gift of poetry, to allow it to augment our consciousness, to expand our imagination. From this intense engagement with poetry we have earned the authority to speak about what poetry is and what it should do.

“Poetics” is a cool word which means “theory of poetry.” It's anything which answers issues like these: Who are poets? What is poetry? How should we choose what poetry to read and what to ignore? How do we recognize great poetry? How exactly is it that poetry manages to affect us when it's just words on paper or words read aloud? What makes the experience of reading a poem different from the experience of reading text on the back of a cereal box? Why should we bother reading poetry at all when there's so many funny youtube videos to keep us busy?

These are not easy questions. Our answers to them will reflect our assumptions and intuitions about the nature of language, reality, knowledge, experience, perception. Emerson's essay “The Poet” represents one attempt to raise and answer such questions. Hyde's reading of Whitman extends and builds upon Emerson's thought by including an involved theory of gifts. At this early point in our study, we might not be able to provide answers as philosophically informed as those that Emerson or Hyde puts forth. But by beginning to think through and form our thoughts around these matters, we begin the process of articulating our own poetics. The early stages of our process of articulation will draw our attention to the places where we may have deadened our thought to lively possibilities by accepting conventional ideas about poetic value which are not actually

true in our own experience. As authors of our own poetics, we become sophisticated readers of poetic writing.

Instructions

Write 2 pages (there's no option to write 1 page this time) describing your thoughts about what poetry is, what it should or can do, how we should interact with it, and how to recognize poetic value. You can certainly draw upon Hirsch's, Emerson's, Whitman's, or Hyde's thought. You're also welcome to consider other points of view that you may have encountered outside of this particular class. And you're certainly welcome to put forth your original perspective on the matter.

NOTE: This read-around is a preparation for our Essay 2. I will give you feedback on this read-around to help you write Essay 2, which will be due in your portfolio on October 18.

The questions I raised in the prompt (“How do we recognize great poetry? How exactly is it that poetry manages to affect us when it’s just words on paper or words read aloud? What makes the experience of reading a poem different from reading the text on the back of a cereal box? Why should we bother to read poetry at all...?”) are all questions I grappled with as I sought to articulate for myself and for my students exactly what poetic inquiry might consist in and why it matters. Throughout the teaching of Reading the Soul of Poetry I was in a condition of Possibility when it came to these questions—I really wanted to know their answers, had a few clues, and yet felt acutely aware of my lack of certainty. Perhaps part of what made Reading the Soul of Poetry a successful course was the very fact that it was itself a project of inquiry, of me trying to figure out alongside the students what could be important, useful, or valuable in poetry.

Many times over in the work of teaching the course I found that my students’ responses to the prompts did indeed help me in my research, and most potently so when they worked as

poetic inquiries, answering the prompts using poetic strategies, as did Molly Burkett in her response to the prompt on Poetry and the Soul and as did Hannah Swysgood in her response to the Articulate Your Poetics prompt:

What are poets? Selfish, egotistical, longing to be admired loved and respected? Is their declaration “I AM AWESOME, WITNESS MY AWESOMENESS!” Or rather do they prompt, “I find this awesome, and maybe you will too?” Are they answering or asking a question, provoking conversation, thought, evoking emotion, creating conflict or resolving it? Is the subject matter, the muse, more important to the poet than his or her own individual experience with that muse? Are poets mediums? Do they exist to translate the stories of the untold, the stories only apparent to those who reside in a “gifted state”? If so, why print their names on their poetry. Why claim their work if the inspiration is the focal point? Is that not a distraction? A craftsman should hold his craft above himself. Creative writing vs. poetry, who is to determine? Is poetry in the eye or soul of the beholder? If it has touched at least one, can it be discarded? Am I awesome to hold my words in such high regards to print them on paper? Yes, some would say I must believe that to be true.

Relations between subject and poet, poet and poetry, poetry and audience, audience back to subject. Cyclic, incestual, soul sharing. Tiny arrows attached to strings shoot through my being. Those strings attached to something or someone, elsewhere in this universe, elsewhere in time perhaps, but who is the archer? Why does one choose to tug those strings, to see what tugs back? To find resistance? To discover what anchors it, or to discover why that anchor is connected to oneself? What part of you has its arrow pierced? Did it pass through others on its way to you? What DNA does its tip possess?

What entrails drip and hang from its string? The blood and guts of a stranger's soul juice intimately adulterate with your own, to hybridize an original masterpiece, and yes, I believe it will be a masterpiece if the infiltration was embraced. No longer are they a stranger; they become lovers and siblings. Your soul ages, doubles and triples as the relationship with this foreign plasma ripens. I refuse to think otherwise. Who are you old woman? What authority do you have? Trying to rob a young mind of its uniquely glorious rendezvous with Frost? "Incorrect." Incorrect? You dare? I heard the Birds' Song, and it was not the same. I sat in the garden, and it was not biblical, not to me. I was virgin. I saw it pure. I felt it untainted. I welcomed the penetration. A solicitous dictator you are. Your attempts to have my soul prostituted as you did your own were stillborn. Riding those who came before you has made you bitter and blind. And I however, remain awesome...but I digress. I do not claim "to get at the meaning of poems" (Whitman), or create poetry myself, because I insist that poetry can only be declared by those on the receiving end, and that the awesomeness of the creators of great work lies in their ability to evoke passion in the souls of the masses, as varied as that passion may be, not to deliver a mass meaning to the few dedicated scholars who choose to search for it.

Swysgood begins her response with an inquiry surrounding the motivation of poets and their relationship to inspiration. Her questions have a rapid-fire energy of urgency and seem troubled by the issue of how a poet might simultaneously act as a medium of a larger creative power (i.e., soul) and also presume to take individual credit for the productions which emerge through that power's influence. Her question, "Creative writing vs. poetry, who is to determine?" foregrounds an issue that also troubles me—how to distinguish writing which merely uses poetic strategies from writing which uses poetic strategies in such a way that brings forth a new thought

(i.e. poetic inquiry). Thus far, my answer to this question is very simple and subjective; it's the same thought that Emily Dickinson offered to H.W. Higginson: "If I feel as if the top of my head has been taken off, I know that is poetry."

After initiating her inquiry, Swysgood moves on to offer a visceral imagination of the relationship between "subject and poet, poet and poetry, poetry and audience, audience back to subject" by means of trope. She presents an image of what it is to receive poetry, "Cyclical, incestual, soul sharing. Tiny arrows attached to strings shoot through my being." This vivid image then raises further questions and thereby expands into an elaborated conceit: "These strings attached to something in someone, elsewhere in the universe, elsewhere in time perhaps but who is the archer?" The query "who is the archer?" is one of striking depth, reaching to discover Whitman's "Origin of All Poems." Among these tropic questions are ones which help me to think through the ways in which readerly resistance can be an entrance to Possibility (something which can be very difficult for me to get my mind around—as if impossible to encompass): "Why does one choose to tug those strings, to see what tugs back? To find resistance? To discover what anchors it, or to discover why that anchor is connected to oneself?" As Swysgood here imagines it, it seems that "tugging" is a way of responding to the connective claims of poetry that tests it, and by this testing seeks to locate its origin in both the other and the self. I begin to wonder: was Layiwola's response to Whitman a form of "tugging"?

Swysgood's vision of poetic communication as string-bound arrows which infiltrate and hybridize reader, subject, poet in a way that's simultaneously sexual, familial and viral is arresting, nearly hysterical—and, it seems to me, quite accurate. It brings to my mind Emily Dickinson's likewise disturbing figuration of affective poetic transmission:

A Word dropped careless on a Page
May consecrate an Eye
When folded in perpetual seam
The Wrinkled Author lie

Infection in the sentence breeds
We may inhale Despair
At distances of Centuries
From the Malaria—
(Fr 1268)

Both Swysgood's response to the prompt and Dickinson's poem evince anxiety about the intentions and motivations (or lack thereof) of the absent, authoring poet. I've already noted the presence of this anxiety in Swysgood's inquiry. We can see it in the very opening line of Dickinson's poem, "A Word dropped Careless on a Page": as the poem unfolds, the carelessness which with the word was dropped seems monstrously out of proportion with the word's negative affective power. Both Swysgood's and Dickinson's figuration of how it is that poetry communicates feeling states invoke the specters of invasive disease (Dickinson's "Infection" and "Malaria"; Swysgood's "blood and guts of a strangers soul juice" and "infiltrate") and sex (Dickinson's "in the sentence *breeds*" [italics mine] and Swysgood's "intimately adulterate" and "lovers and siblings"). Both figurations highlight the potentially troubling or dangerous dimension of what can happen when soul advents through form (of poetic communication, of soul communication)— a dimension which I tend to blithely ignore, buoyed by an optimism which believes I can emerge essentially unscathed from any encounter with poetic, soulful

alterity—no matter how intense. Though my own reading experience at times belies this optimism, I maintain it perhaps as a denial which enables me to continue reading rather than shutting down my exploration out of fear. I also notice in Swysgood's complexly visceral articulation of her poetics an essential hope that the poetic encounter, dangerous as it may be, when fully received and yielded to, can bring forth something great: "The blood and guts of a strangers soul juice intimately adulterate with your own, to hybridize an original masterpiece, and yes, I believe it will be a masterpiece if the infiltration was embraced." Here the term "masterpiece" seems both to indicate a condition of the soul which has been somehow elevated and perfected by its intimate adulteration with another's poetry (the "blood and guts of a strangers soul juice") and also to suggest the production of a new, highly accomplished and original work of art which is only made possible by the encounter and hybridization with the poem-as-alterity. My reading that the "masterpiece" whose emergence Swysgood hails is not only a work of art but also a condition of the soul itself brought about through the reading encounter is supported by Swysgood's statement "Your soul ages, doubles and triples as the relationship with this foreign plasma ripens." The notion of the soul aging and becoming larger ("doubles and triples") through its relationship with poetry recalls to me Edward Hirsch's insight that "poetry is a soul-making activity" (an insight which is itself an expansion on Keats' claim that "this world is a vale of Soul-making.")

Swysgood's response now turns to give further questions about authority, now not only of poets themselves but of poetry teachers and scholars. This query takes the form of an angry address to a past poetry teacher:

Who are you old woman? What authority do you have? Trying to rob a young mind of its uniquely glorious rendezvous with Frost? 'Incorrect.'

Incorrect? You dare? I heard the Birds' Song, and it was not the same. I sat in the garden, and it was not biblical, not to me. I was virgin. I saw it pure. I felt it untainted. I welcomed the penetration. A solicitous dictator you are. Your attempts to have my soul prostituted as you did your own were stillborn. Riding those who came before you has made you bitter and blind.

This address appears to me as a reclamation of readerly self-reliance. In dramatic monologue, Swysgood defends the authenticity of her own imaginative reading encounter with a Frost poem against the stifling charge of "Incorrect" offered by a poetry teacher who is more concerned with "the meaning of poems" than with their Origin and fruit.

Finally, Swysgood concludes her response with a gesture of impressive humility: "I do not claim to ... create poetry myself, because I insist that poetry can only be declared by those on the receiving end." Swysgood's decision here to surrender any claim to "create poetry myself" as a resolution to the problem she highlights with regards to poetic authority and attribution is a kind of fierce modesty which also recalls Dickinson's renunciation which is also a simultaneous gesture towards relationship ("I'm Nobody! / Who are you? / Are you – Nobody - too? / Then there's a pair of us! / Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!" [Fr 260]).

6.4 THE ZEALOUS BOX: EXPLORING THE GIFT ECONOMY OF POETIC INQUIRY

Following our efforts to articulate our poetics, I invited my students to participate in an experiment titled the Poetry Gift Exchange. Our undertaking this experiment followed our reading of Lewis Hyde's essay "A Draft of Whitman" from his book *The Gift: Creativity and the*

Artist in the Modern World. We'd already practiced becoming receptive to the immaterial gift at work in Whitman's poetry and now we would practice giving a symbolic material item meant to represent the immaterial idea of poetry:

Experiment Instructions: Poetry Gift Exchange

Find, buy, or create an item that to you represents "poetry" which you will give to a random classmate. Write a letter about this item, describing why and how it represents "poetry" to you, and telling how you hope the person who receives the gift will benefit from it. Bring your gift and your letter to class on Monday, October 11th.

I invite you to put thought and effort into this gift. You don't know who will receive it, it's for no traditional occasion—but the process of generating and then gifting this item can take you very close to the heart of the magic that we're trying to access in this class. Let your gift reflect the fullest range of your thought about what poetry might, could, or should be and do. Surprise us and yourself with your generosity and brilliance.

Though I asked students to offer as a gift a concrete symbol of poetry, my motivation for orchestrating the Poetry Gift Exchange was not simply to engage my students in symbolic thinking (though this is incredibly important to the project of poetic inquiry); I was also interested to experience how the phenomenon of concrete giving and receiving would work to create a movement of soul or Geist within the classroom itself, a movement which my reading of Hyde caused me to anticipate. Any class early in a semester is a collection of discrete individuals without much relation to one another; as the semester progresses, a class often gains coherence as a community through its cumulative experience of sharing ideas. This coherence, Hyde might say, is a direct consequence of the act of free giving and receiving, as gift economies tend to

create intimate associations (meanwhile, commodity economies, i.e., buying and selling, tend to emphasize separation and difference). I hypothesized that a concrete gift exchange would activate the soulful energies of a gift economy in a more direct and perhaps speedy manner than the sharing of thoughts which tends to cohere a class over time. In other words, I theorized that a concrete exchange of gifts might be one way for us to shift together into a condition of Possibility.

On the day of the exchange, everyone held their items and their letters on their desks. I began the process by sharing with the group a letter from our classmate, Aradhana Purker, who had been in a severe car accident the week prior. Though suffering from brain swelling and dizziness and unable to attend class or read or write, Purker (far exceeding anything I would have expected or asked from someone in her circumstance) went ahead and completed the experiment assignment by dictating a letter to her mother which was then sent to me via email. Purker had spoken to us previously of her studying to prepare to specialize in neurosurgery; the fact that she subsequently experienced a brain injury and then herself required the attention of neurospecialists is no happy coincidence, but it is noteworthy. I reproduce Purker's letter here because it so stirred me, and set the tone for our whole exchange:

I am in the hospital as I write this letter and am pretty much restrained to this room, so finding a gift that represents what poetry means to me is a bit of a challenge. But, just looking around at my surroundings, I guess I would say that everything *here* represents poetry to me. Well, may be not the dull walls or the just sanitized way-too-clean smell, but the idea of a hospital and all the things inside it that *heal* you. But even then, I guess buying a whole hospital is impossible, so if I could choose something to

give you, I would buy you a stethoscope, as it is the universal symbol of medicine and healing.

From our brief chats in class, I'm sure you know I want to be a doctor. My reason for wanting to be one however stems from a need to want to make a difference in someone's life. I believe that after you die, who you are is how people remember you. So if I can positively affect the life of one human being or if I can heal just one person so that they can live a full life (whether they remember me or not), I think that I will die satisfied knowing that I made this world a slightly better place. Be the change you want to see in the world, right?

And that's what poetry means to me. I'm sure you're thinking: that's a rather strange analogy. But you see, just like medicine heals your body, poetry, in my opinion, heals your soul. Whether it's writing about your feelings or reading what someone else wrote and thinking, "Wow, that person just said what I feel more perfectly than I could ever have imagined," poetry gives you a means of expressing anything and everything. Expression that is often times so liberating that it heals you.

I honestly don't think I would've ever thought about poetry in this way had it not been for reading "Song of Myself," by Walt Whitman. That poem holds more meaning to me than I could describe in words because reading it helped me experience a catharsis; I literally felt as though the thoughts it inspired made me a more whole human being... a healed human being... because it expressed *me* and who I was at that particular moment better than I could have ever done. And I'm sure that there are other people in this world who have experienced the same healing effect I felt after a reading or writing a poem they

felt expressed *them*. The poem changed them, just liked it changed me. And the poem made an impact, whether it be a small dent or a gaping hole, on who they were.

And for that reason, I whole-heartedly believe that poetry is therapy and poetry is healing. It's like medicine, but for your soul. So as my gift to you, I would hand you a stethoscope because it represents healing; it represents not only what poetry does, but *what poetry is*.

Purker's conclusion "that poetry is therapy and poetry is healing" does not represent a novel thought; it's a concept at least as old as Plato. What struck me so powerfully about her letter is the gravitas of its rhetorical situation: here is a woman willing to make a strong claim for poetry's healing quality who is herself in a predicament where the matter of "healing" is hugely urgent and not in the least abstract: healing is both what she requires for her own body and also what she aspires to give to others. I was also struck by how Purker, a person who at the start of the semester nervously professed to not be able to think creatively or to "get" poetry at all, totally "got" it. Her experience of Whitman's healing impact on her soul had a reverberating healing effect on me. At that point in the semester, I'd allowed my ever-present doubts about the value of my concern with the soul of poetry to become loud and troubling. Why was I so intent on swimming upstream? Why couldn't I just stick with literary studies as it had been taught to me: produce a normal dissertation, teach a regular reading poetry class? For that matter, why had I ever come to graduate school to begin with?

Purker's letter allayed my doubts about the value of my teaching. The letter, as I noted before, doesn't offer an original argument about poetry: it doesn't argue at all, really—it reports an experience. This, in part, reflects the fact that I did not teach the work of making arguments about poetry in the class; I instead focused on guiding students to be receptive to

writing which in my estimate offered the potential for soulful encounter and thus an incitement to poetic inquiry. This approach rewarded me many times over—as students expressed their experiences I myself felt nourished and enlivened.

The class followed our Poetry Gift Exchange by responding to a prompt that directly asked students to participate in both movements of poetic inquiry (entering into Possibility and speaking-forth from Possibility using poetic strategies):

Read-Around Prompt: Responding-Forth to the Gift

Consideration

In his essay, “The Labor of Gratitude” (which comes from the same book as “A Draft of Whitman”), Lewis Hyde writes:

The future artist finds himself or herself moved by a work of art, and, through that experience, comes to labor in the service of art until he can profess his own gifts. Those of us who do not become artists nonetheless attend to art in a similar spirit. We come to painting, to poetry, to the stage, hoping to revive the soul. And any artist whose work touches us earns our gratitude.... It is when art acts as an agent of transformation that we may correctly speak of it as a gift... I would like to speak of gratitude as a labor undertaken by the soul to effect the transformation after a gift has been received. (59-60)

As Hyde explains, there are two phases of accepting a gift: receiving and responding. We received Whitman’s gift. Then we received gifts of poetry from our

classmates. Now it's time for us to focus on responding forth from the perspective of our gifted selves, which is a labor of gratitude that transforms us.

Though valid and important responses to the gift of poetry include all manner of inspired actions and creations, for the purpose of this class we'll focus on responding forth in poetic writing. (Notice that I didn't say "with a poem." The word "poem," I'm beginning to suspect, carries perhaps too many limiting connotations). Our labor of gratitude will be the work of trying to write something that develops, expresses, and passes on to others the gift that we've received.

Instructions

I ask that in response to the gift of poetry that you've received thus far (from Whitman, from your classmate, from reading something else) that you offer 1-2 pages of poetic writing.

Aim to produce writing that's full of Geist (soul), rich in stirring aesthetic ideas and troping language that can't be assimilated by the rational mind or reduced to paraphrase. Hyde tells us, "A work of art that enters us to feed the soul offers to initiate in us the process of the gifted self which some antecedent gift initiated in the poet. Reading the work, *we* feel gifted for a while, and to the degree that we are able, we respond by creating new work" (251 "A Draft of Whitman"). I suggest that you write from that gifted state, and allow your labor of writing to transform you.

In this prompt I used Hyde's theory of creative gift exchange in order to ask students to acknowledge the extent to which they'd already been moved to enter the condition of Possibility via our class experiments and practices of reading ("We received Whitman's gift. Then we received the gifts of poetry from our classmates") and then requested that they speak forth from this condition of Possibility using poetic strategy ("Now it's time for us to focus on responding forth from the perspective of our gifted selves, which is a labor of gratitude that transforms us... we'll refocus on responding forth in poetic writing"). Specifically, I asked that they speak forth in a manner that could inspire others to enter Possibility and generate further poetic inquiry by asking for writing "that develops, expresses, and passes on to others the gift that we've received" and "that's full of Geist (soul), rich in stirring aesthetic ideas and troping language that can't be assimilated by the rational mind or reduced to paraphrase." My request that they use language rich with Geist followed upon class activities in which we discussed Kant's "On the nature of genius" and read William Blake's "A Sick Rose" and Dickinson's "This World is Not Conclusion" with attention to the ways those works succeeded in bringing-forth soul (Geist) via poetic strategies that generate movement non-encompassable by rational thought. These class activities represented the practice of "reading to learn poetic strategy" rather than the practices of reading I discussed in the first part of this treatise (contemplative reading, intensive reading, and thinking-with) which are all primarily modes of reading-to-enter-Possibility.

Now looking at this prompt, I am struck by how little specific instruction it offers on the use of poetic strategy in the work of responding-forth. It may be that I spent too little time in *Reading the Soul of Poetry* in instructing students on the use of poetic strategy. To a large degree, I asked them to draw upon what they already knew of poetic strategy from prior experience and from our class readings of Blake and Dickinson in order to offer forth their own

aesthetical ideas / new thoughts. I began to overcome my reticence in giving specific instructions about the use of poetic strategy in the final two writing prompts of the semester (Elemental Odes and The Lyric Essay). I think part of my reluctance to give this kind of direction arose out of my self-consciousness about the course being a “literature” class, with the official title “Reading Poetry.” I felt I was already perhaps stretching matters by asking students to produce their own poetic writing in a course on *Reading* Poetry, so to spend our class time teaching them exactly how to use poetic strategies perhaps felt like going too far to me at the time.

Despite my likely inadequate instructions about how to use poetic strategies, many of my students did a fantastic job of it anyway. One student, Daniel Radin, whose work for the class had previously manifested a kind of dutiful prosiness, surprised me by offering a delightful poem rich with gesture and trope, whose effervescent rhymes and puns somehow remind me both of Andrew Marvell and Alexander Pope:

A Gift For You

A zealous box, within it lies
Bricks of mortar in apple pies
A coat in summer’s heat does shiver
Three lovely takers and a jealous giver
Stairs too steep and tall to find
Gentle fragments sewn by time
Young students learning of life itself
Teachers speaking down to Santa’s elf
Fuzzy bristles of a peach

A lost and long forgotten beach
With tides that wrinkle its frothy shore
My childhood idol who I adore
Stands under the cavernous wood
Preaching evil's name in good
Choking on the smoking screen
Drowning in a forgotten dream
Only to awaken drenched in tears
Crying in spite of cleverer fears
For each wiser than the next
Climbed highest mountain in Tibet
Stars too far apart to blame
Winds that echo Mary's name
Bullets ripping through today
Try to keep all wolves at bay
Hardly clipping naive dove
Hugs that reach from heaven above
Hearing words that were never spoken
Building temples once were broken
Ratting out the mice and moles
Filling all the doughnut holes
Losing teeth, becoming man
Spraying on a native tan

Learning when it's time to pray
Shadows growing old and gray
Milked to emptiness nutrition
Atheists and superstition
Temper tantrum fiercely furious
Adolescent purely curious
Ecstasy precedes surprise
Frozen solid by your eyes
Swaying back and forth in place
The gift we hold is back on pace.

In my estimation, Radin's "A Gift to You" succeeds in offering what the assignment requested: "writing that's full of Geist (soul), rich in stirring aesthetical ideas and troping language that can't be assimilated by the rational mind or reduced to paraphrase." Furthermore, its emergence from a student who, previous to our work in class meant to help us enter the imaginative perspective of Possibility evinced little imaginative proclivity suggests to me that Radin indeed wrote from a gifted state, an expanded condition of Possibility initiated by our class readings and experiments.

Radin's poem is the sort that would have been torn apart in the creative writing workshops I attended as an undergraduate and probably in many such workshops that are offered today: its rhymed couplets are hopelessly unfashionable and perhaps easily misread as unsophisticated. I wish to offer a reading of the poem that underlines the way that it succeeds in offering an aesthetical Idea.

We begin by noticing that everything the poem lists— its big bouncing catalogue of things and persons and actions and stages of life—is what the speaker reports as existing inside “a zealous box.” Since the title of the poem is “A Gift for You,” I gather that the “zealous box” is a kind of boxed present: its manifold contents are the gift being offered. The notion of a boxed gift containing a vast array of “stuff” ranging from the surreally nonsensical (“Bricks of mortar in apple pies”) and mythic (“Three lovely takers and a jealous giver”— a reference to the goddesses with Paris and the golden apple?) to the menacing (“Bullets ripping through today”) and wryly political (“Spraying on a native tan”) is itself an aesthetical Idea, a thought which cannot be he compassed by the rational mind. The poem then raises questions (i.e., it inquires of me as a reader): in what ways are these gifts? On what authority does the speaker give them? My mind is held open within the condition of Possibility as I contemplate the question. Gradually, I become inclined to read “A Gift for You” it as a kind of *Ars Poetica*: the gift (the zealous box) holds an allegorical poetry—poetry which includes a vast assortment—that which we have already noted, along with the impossible (“Stairs too steep and tall to find”), the pleasurable (“fuzzy bristles of a peach”), the shocking (“My childhood idol who I adore /Stands under the cavernous wood / Preaching evil’s name in good “), and the mysteriously intuited (“Hearing words that were never spoken”). All of this is offered in a manner which suggests that the giver is powerfully transfixed by the one to whom he offers his present: “Frozen solid by your eyes / Swaying back and forth in place / The gift we hold is back on pace.” I read these concluding lines as the speaker of the poem performatively enacting a present-tense meeting with the reader which is of a distinct intensity. It’s as if the giver at this moment is giving beyond his own choice—there’s something about being frozen solid and swaying “back and forth in place” which suggests a state of involuntary hypnosis. As I read these lines I am guided to consider the degree

to which the author is beholden to the reader, constrained like Trilby by Svengali, forced to give forth a creative gift on demand. These connotations of a creative gift brought forth via hypnotic compulsion provide me with both a means of thinking about the artist-audience relationship in general and also with a means of considering something that has already come up as I regarded other outstanding student responses to the prompts I designed: the complex situation of poetic inquiry performed within a classroom context, as work for which a grade will be given and credit toward a degree will be earned. In this classroom context, the gift – here, Radin’s poem— is to some extent not given freely. In a sense, I called it forth through the exercise of my institutional authority—if Radin had declined to complete the assignment (which asked explicitly for a gift), he would have had to accept the consequence of a lowered grade. In this situation-specific interpretation of the poem’s concluding lines, I myself am the reader-as-Svengali, the one whose eyes cause the speaker to freeze solid, sway, and hold forth an offering against (or perhaps beyond) his will. It is interesting for the purposes of this reading for me to recall that Svengali not only compelled Trilby to sing under his hypnotic influence, but also that Trilby could not sing at all otherwise—she was tone deaf. It’s not comfortable for me to envision myself in the role of teacher-as-Svengali compelling the student-as-Trilby to sing beautifully beyond his normal capacity, though the concluding lines of the poem and the situation of its emergence do suggest this.

Perhaps it could be argued that poetic inquiry is something that should not be taught in a university. Such an argument might go like this: poetic inquiry (the pursuit of truth via poetic perception and articulation), should be a free project, compelled and graded by no one. Perhaps the teaching of it should happen, but should be a free service rather than something offered in exchange for tuition, and the learning of it should happen, but should be a free study rather than

something done to fulfill a requirement for a degree. The very presence of institutional evaluation existing between the teacher / reader and student / poetic inquirer could be seen as grossly complicating the teaching of poetic inquiry, leading to a situation in which the student is asked to offer forth the fruits of poetic inquiry (i.e. gifts) with the awareness that these fruits will not be primarily received and gratefully appreciated *as gifts* (which I would say is the appropriate way that the fruits of poetic inquiry should be received) but will be rather assessed and graded, used to evaluate the student's performance. When one gives a Christmas present, one knows that the receiver of the present may enjoy it very much or very little, but the purpose of the giving is to inspire goodwill and connection—one does not give a Christmas present in hopes of receiving a good grade and course credit—and if one does, then one has grossly misunderstood the spirit of the gift exchange to the point of participating in bribery rather than giving.

6.5 THE DREAMERS OF DREAMS: USING DREAMS AS RESOURCES FOR POETIC INQUIRY

Building upon the insight that poetic inquiry is something that happens at night as we dream, I designed an experiment and prompt for Reading the Soul of Poetry which sought to help students consciously extend the work of poetic inquiry in which their psyches were already engaged. I first asked students to keep a dream journal for two weeks:

Experiment Instructions: Keep a Dream Journal

Consideration

At the conclusion of his essay, “The Poet,” Emerson gives a rousing encouragement to the potential poet in all of us: “Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say ‘It is in me, and shall out.’ Stand there, balked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until at last rage draw out of thee that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity” (305).

In this experiment, we will make a conscious record of our experiences with an extraordinary creative power: the force that generates our dreams, the force which is somehow beyond us and yet also our own. It is by connecting with this “*dream*-power” that we can gain access to the “whole river of electricity” and expand our abilities of perception and expression. In other words, through relating to our dreams we nurture ourselves as poets, and in so doing we become more sensitive and responsive readers of other people’s poetry.

Instructions

Starting tomorrow morning and continuing until our class meeting on Wednesday, November 3, keep a dream journal. Put a notebook and pen by your bed. When getting ready to sleep at night, firmly tell yourself, “When I wake I’ll remember my dreams. I will totally remember my dreams tomorrow!” Imagine yourself waking up in the morning with perfect recall of your dreams and happily writing them out. Then go to sleep. When

you wake in the morning, grab your notebook and pen and immediately write about what you can remember of your subconscious adventures.

Some tips:

- If you should wake early in the morning to visit the rest room and have an awareness of a dream—write it down then, before going back to sleep. There's a fair chance you won't be able to remember it after falling asleep again.

- Make your initial writing about your dream as detailed as you can. If you just scribble “peanut-butter shoes, rhinoceros, Grandma Rose?” thinking that these notes are sure to jog your memory later—you will probably be wrong.

- If you have trouble remembering your dreams, try waking up at various times and testing your recall. I find that I remember dreams best when I wake at 7:30 (and then hit snooze and go back to sleep).

-- You'll recall more if you keep your eyes closed while trying to remember the dream.

-- You'll recall more if you record your dreams in the present tense rather than the past tense.

In this experiment prompt, I made clear to students that the reason I wished them to keep a dream journal was so that they might deliberately partake of “that *dream*-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity” (Emerson 305). The creative force which Emerson, in this passage from “The Poet” calls “*dream*-power” is the same force which he

elsewhere calls “the soul.” As this passage suggests, Emerson did not make any firm distinction between the individual, personal, or private soul and the creative force of the universe, the Over-Soul. Indeed, in his essay “The Over-Soul,” Emerson emphasized, “as there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so is there no bar or wall in the soul where man, the effect, ceases, and . . . the cause [i.e., the Over-Soul], begins” [238]. Thus the term “soul” in Emerson’s oeuvre can variously and even simultaneously refer to an individual expression of the creative power conditioned with certain qualities (i.e., in the way that we might say someone has a “great soul” or a “corrupt soul”) or that same power in its universal, unconditioned state (“the whole river of electricity”). Emerson’s poetic theory that the soul is in some sense identical with that-which-creates-dreams or, we might say, with the dream itself is the same intuition which Molly Burkett expressed in her response to the first prompt of the semester: “Soul begins as the sun disappears into rays of red, orange, and black-purple.”

In the prompt, I offered to students that engaging with “the whole river of electricity” via the work of recording dreams in a journal could help them develop both their “abilities of perception and expression.” In giving this claim, I suggest that the work of attending to night-time dreams can help with both entering the condition of Possibility (i.e., the first movement of poetic inquiry-- expanding imaginative perception) and also with the project of communicating truth via the deployment of poetic strategies (i.e., expressing imaginative perception). Dream journal work can help with the first movement of poetic inquiry because the act of giving attention to dreams is itself a practice of opening to what is outside the bounds of mundane reality, an opening that the ordinary mind resists (for example, most people rapidly forget their dreams upon waking or do not recall their dreams at all). Dream journal work can help with the second movement of poetic inquiry because, as we have already noted, dreams partake of the

same tactics as poetry: gesture, drama, fiction, and trope. To attend to a dream that one has dreamt is in some ways the same as attending to a poem— a poem that in some sense one has written or created. To attend to one’s dreams can therefore (as Emerson suggested) help to instill confidence in one that one does indeed have the creative power that can readily use poetic strategies.

The writing prompt which I subsequently gave to the students asked them to use their dream journals as a resource in the work of making-conscious the process of poetic inquiry that their psyches (i.e., souls—“psyche” being a Greek word for “soul”) were already engaged in. The prompt pointed to a work we read together as a class, Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, as an example of a poetic inquiry that made conscious and explicit very profound questions:

Read-Around Prompt: Dream Questions

Consideration

In the *Duino Elegies*, Rilke raises questions that are larger-than-life: questions that aren't the ordinary kind we raise in our everyday experience but which reach into mythic depths and personal pathos: "Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?" (151) "Lovers, gratified in each other, I am asking _you_ about us. You hold each other. Where is your proof?" (159). I want us to write our own poems which raise questions that are of this vast scale and demand answers with a similar urgency.

Instructions

Go through your dream journals. What questions are your dreams attempting to answer? Write a poem which asks these dream-questions and any others that obsess you. In your poem, answer those questions. Your answers may include characters, situations, tones and places from your dreams and also anything else. Model the form of your poem on the elegies.

The query which I posed to the students in this prompt: “What questions are your dreams attempting to answer?” was one designed to draw their attention to the ways in which their dreams already functioned as poetic inquiries. It’s a difficult question, and one much different from the conventional question of dream analysis “What do your dreams mean?” To ask “What questions are my dreams trying to answer?” is to attend more primarily to the dream as a poetic process, as a process of making (“poeïsis” means “making”), and less to the dream as a finished artifact or statement. This is a question which I hoped would move students toward the condition of Possibility, towards thinking-with the dream rather than “about” it. In this sense it resembles the modes of reading poems that I asked students to engage in order to help them to move into the condition of Possibility. I then requested an action of the students—I asked that after ascertaining what questions their dreams might be trying to answer, that they then “answer those questions” in the form of a poem. In making this request, I sought to engage students in the work of the second movement of poetic inquiry, the use of poetic strategies towards the expression of truth.

I want to now consider a student response to the Dream Questions prompt, an untitled poem by Sean Brodarick, which does the work of posing and answering such questions. Within this consideration, I hope to draw attention to the way in which Brodarick moves toward generating a new thought:

What lies before me? A lake, serene and calm on its surface
Is turbulent underneath.
So many have gone before me, and passed this lake on their own accord,
Lived lives worthy of living
But should it be so easy?
They say there's strength to be had through hardship,
So buck up and press hard the oars.
Anchors aweigh, and drink to the foam
Is life better when you travel alone?
It is hard to find peace in sleep when your rest is on your feet.
It's as if life itself is your dream.
How is it any different? Aimlessly drifting about
An actor in your fantasy, but who is the audience?
Estranged lover, you knew the best of me,
Surely Paris knew the same, with the armies bearing down.
It wasn't ambition like this, that saw us part.
Like the flickering of a candle,
fighting to stay lit against the pressing breeze, we were soon extinguished.
Ah, but the heat's missed all the same.

Stories echo from the past, of heroes-the greatest generation
The sandy beaches, now so calm, were then
Stained with blood and machines of war.
The heroes, who took the beach, would they wonder
today,
What happened to the world?

Brodarick's poem begins by contemplating the question "What lies before me?" (a question that to me sounds similar to Hirshfield's "What is the nature of this moment?" [53]). The immediate answer given to "What lies before me?" is "A lake, serene and calm on its surface / Is turbulent underneath." The speaker goes on to consider his relationship to others who have encountered the very same seemingly-calm-yet-actually-turbulent lake:

So many have gone before me, and passed this lake on their own accord,
Lived lives worthy of living
But should it be so easy?
They say there's strength to be had through hardship,
So buck up and press hard the oars.

In this passage the speaker contrasts those who simply pass by the lake (an action he denotes as "easy") with his own choice to take the more difficult route of crossing the lake. It seems that the speaker feels some ambivalence about his choice—after all, those who "passed this lake on their own accord / Lived lives worthy of living." The rest of the poem explores the consequences of the speaker's decision to have faith in the proverbial wisdom that "there's strength to be had through hardship" and thus to "buck up and press hard the oars" across the lake whose appearance belies its own turbulence. In the course of this crossing, further questions

arise. The query “Is life better when you travel alone?” seems to prompt a realization, via a string of further insight and questions (It’s as if life itself is your dream. / How is it any different? Aimlessly drifting about /An actor in your fantasy, but who is the audience?”) of a kind of cosmic solitude— a realization that in living one’s life one may be an actor in a fantasy that has no audience. Immediately following this consideration of existential aloneness, the speaker then turns to address an “estranged lover” in a situation which very definitely evokes the plot of the movie classic *Casablanca*:

Estranged lover, you knew the best of me,
Surely Paris knew the same, with the armies bearing down.
It wasn’t ambition like this, that saw us part.
Like the flickering of a candle,
fighting to stay lit against the pressing breeze, we were soon extinguished.
Ah, but the heat’s missed all the same.

The fact that the speaker had a lover at all seems to argue against the notion of complete solitude in the audience-less drama of life, suggesting that intimacy can happen both between two people and between a person and his situation (“you knew the best of me, / Surely Paris knew the same, with the armies bearing down”) yet the brevity and fitfulness of the lovers’ union (“Like the flickering of a candle”) seems to support the speaker’s earlier intuition that life itself might be merely a passing dream or fantasy, easily dispersed and threatened. The passion of love, though short and perhaps ultimately illusory, serves to increase the speaker’s consciousness of being alone (“the heat’s missed all the same”). Finally, the concluding lines of the poem invert the initial question and answer of the opening lines. Now, rather than asking “What lies before me?” (a question which could be construed as inquiring about both the present and the future),

the speaker attends to stories that “echo from the past, of heroes—the greatest generation” and rather than looking out onto a lake, points to the calm beaches of Normandy. Like the calmness of the lake which belies underlying turbulence, the present-day calmness of the beach belies the dramatic and consequential battle which once took place there (“The sandy beaches, now so calm, were then / Stained with blood and machines of war”). This consideration leads the speaker to make explicit his imaginative inhabitation of the past heroes (an inhabitation which he implicitly enacted in his adoption of the *Casablanca* romance plot) and their question upon regarding the calmness of the beach: “What happened to the world?” It seems to me that this question, posed by the speaker / the heroes of the past, implies a criticism of present-day attitudes which prefer ease to courageous struggle. In this sense, the concluding question answers the speaker’s initial ambivalence about his choice to accept difficulty rather than to embrace the ease evinced by those who “passed this lake on their own accord.”

Is it the case that Brodarick’s poem is a new thought in the highest sense which Emerson expressed in “The Poet”—“a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing”? No, I don’t think I would say that it is. The order of new thought that Emerson describes in “The Poet” is a relatively rare kind of emergence, the product of genius, something which Emerson felt he could not find in his own contemporaries (“I look in vain for the poet whom I describe” [304]) until he met Walt Whitman. A new thought of the kind Emerson describes is one which has widespread consequence—its freshness is jarring and provokes further new thought (in the way that *Leaves of Grass* has inspired generations of poets). In this sense, we might say that a “new thought” in the high sense that Emerson described is equivalent to what the literary theorist Derek Attridge calls a “singularity” in literature.

Yet while I do not think that Brodarick's poem succeeds in adventing a new thought in the highest sense, I do think that it brings forth a thought which is new to Brodarick. In other words, I think Brodarick's participation in the movements of poetic inquiry caused him to produce a poem that allowed him to imaginatively articulate for himself his own relationship to his contemporaries and to his forefathers. In doing so, it seems to me that Brodarick engages in poetic inquiry as "a soul-making activity" (Hirsch), which is to say, as an activity in which life is given context, meaning and significance. Brodarick, an ROTC student, not only makes his own choices meaningful by imaginatively associating himself with the heroes of World War II, he also explores the pathos of life experienced as a fleeting and solitary dream. The fact that the notion of life as a dream or vain drama is one which has received previous (and more skillful) poetic articulation does not diminish the eventfulness in Brodarick's own life of his articulation of that experience. It may appear that I am here arguing for the personal therapeutic value of poetic inquiry.⁹ Yet this is not what I am saying. I am saying that even if the fruit of a particular poetic inquiry is not particularly earth-shaking to others, the act of that poetic inquiry can still be valuable and important for the person who undertook it, and can therefore provide the foundation for a continued practice of poetic inquiry which could eventually lead to the production of a genuinely amazing new thought. The work of poetic inquiry, like many other endeavors, can

⁹ It's also possible that the value of poetic inquiries whose fruit is less-than-revelatory is not limited to just the persons who undertake those inquiries. It seems to me that Brodarick's poem could be of value to other persons of his generation and situation who feel a disaffection with the widespread ethos of easeful consumer luxury and who feel called to some larger heroic purpose.

take practice and even life-long dedication in order to bear fruit which is truly remarkable and relevant on a large scale.

6.6 PRAISING THIS WORLD TO THE ANGEL: EXPERIMENTS WITH METAPHOR AS A STRATEGY OF THE SECOND MOVEMENT OF POETIC INQUIRY

In the final writing prompts of the semester, the Elemental Ode prompt and the Lyric Essay prompt, I more explicitly instructed students in the use of poetic strategies for the purpose of poetic inquiry. Specifically, I invited my students to experiment with metaphor as a strategy in poetic inquiry. In retrospect, I emphasized metaphor to my students above other varieties of poetic strategy (including other tropes like synecdoche and irony) because metaphor seemed to me both the most readily graspable poetic strategy and also the most immediately rewarding poetic strategy.

This greater explicitness with my students about the use of poetic strategy arose as I myself became more clear about what kind of work exactly constituted the second movement of poetic inquiry. This clarity came to me as I participated along with the class in all our writing assignments, and especially as I re-read with the class Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and *Letters to a Young Poet*, where Rilke emphasizes the importance of poetic praise. Re-reading Rilke caused me to remember one of my first poetic loves—the elemental odes of Pablo Neruda. I shared with the class a small selection of these odes, including my favorite, “Ode to the Lemon”:

Out of lemon flowers

loosed
on the moonlight, love's
lashed and insatiable
essences,
sodden with fragrance,
the lemon tree's yellow
emerges,
the lemons
move down
from the tree's planetarium

Delicate merchandise!
The harbors are big with it –
bazaars
for the light and the
barbarous gold.
We open
the halves
of a miracle,
and a clotting of acids
brims
into the starry
divisions:

creation's
original juices,
irreducible, changeless,
alive: so the freshness lives on
in a lemon,
in the sweet-smelling house of the rind,
the proportions, arcane and acerb.

Cutting the lemon
the knife
leaves a little cathedral:
alcoves unguessed by the eye
that opens acidulous glass
to the light; topazes
riding the droplets,
altars,
aromatic facades.

So while the hand
holds the cut of the lemon,
half a world
on a trencher,
the gold of the universe

wells
to your touch:
a cup yellow
with miracles,
a breast and a nipple
perfuming the earth;
a flashing made fruitage,
the diminutive fire of a planet.

(Neruda 137)

“Ode to the Lemon” and Neruda’s other elemental odes all exuberantly enact a mode of poetic inquiry very similar to that which we attended to earlier when we read the passage in “Song of Myself” where Whitman elaborates on “What is the grass?” All of the odes pose the implicit question: “What is this ordinary thing?” and respond in a manner that seeks the truth. In the case of “Ode to a Lemon,” of course, the question is “What is a lemon?” and the answers, as Neruda gives them, are quite dazzling. The lemon, of course, is something composed of “love’s / lashed and insatiable / essences” which when cut reveals “a little cathedral” of “acidulous glass” and “aromatic facades”— finally, it is “a cup yellow with miracles, / a breast and a nipple / perfuming the earth; / a flashing made fruitage, / the diminutive fire of a planet.”

In the Elemental Ode prompt, I asked students to imitate Neruda’s mode of poetic inquiry:

Read Around: Elemental Ode

Consideration

Writing elemental odes is one way of fulfilling the deep poetic human mission that Rilke discovered in the Ninth Duino Elegy: “Perhaps we are *here* in order to say: house, bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window—at most: column, tower.... But to *say* them, you must understand, oh to say them *more* intensely than the Things themselves ever dreamed of existing.” Rilke also called this “Prais[ing] this world to the angel” and considered it a transformative act which answers the command given to us as beings by the nature of the world.

At the very least, writing elemental odes is a way to practice gratitude and humility, a way to focus our attention on the gifts which are bountifully present in our lives, to stop taking for granted the marvelous materials that grace our existence. It’s a way of bringing more imagination into our lives, and therefore, according to Emerson’s thought, a way of expanding our awareness of soul. (Emerson once wrote: “The Soul without Imagination is what an observatory would be without a telescope.”)

Instructions

Write an elemental ode, in imitation of Neruda’s. Choose an every day item and write a rapturous, ecstatic poem of praise to it. Though the odes we just read all had to do with food in one way or another, your ode does not need to be about food (Neruda wrote multiple volumes of odes to pretty much everything, including a very famous “Ode to My Socks”), but it *does* need to be about something quite basic and ordinary, something which would not usually receive such vigorous and elaborate praise. Imitate Neruda’s style: use short lines and bold, even hyperbolic metaphors in your praising.

Elemental odes are nothing if not imaginative, and a major function of imaginative language, as the poet Shelley observed in his “Defense of Poetry,” is to mark “the before unapprehended relation of things.” In other words, like Neruda’s odes, your poem should show us the ways that the ordinary item which you celebrate is related to the rest of the world and life. How is it related—by resemblance, by provenance, by physical proximity, by quality, by color, by cause-and-effect—to other items and experiences in life? For example, in the “Ode to Wine” Neruda discovers a relationship of resemblance between his lover and a range of things having to do with wine: “My darling, suddenly / the line of your hip / becomes the brimming curve / of the wine goblet, / your breast is the grape cluster / your nipples are the grapes, / the gleam of spirits lights your hair, / and your navel is a chaste seal / stamped on the vessel of your belly...”

In this prompt, I plainly invited students to become Rilkean “bees of the invisible”—to participate in the project of making apparent the metamorphosis of soul through form via the work of symbolic articulation by invoking lines from Rilke’s penultimate Duino Elegy in which the speaker of that elegy dramatically realizes the importance of poetic expression, of offering the world back to itself through language, after having dipped it in what Hirshfield calls the mind of openness and connection (209). Realizing that my students might not yet be capable of the kind of intense conscious articulation of the world which the speaker of the elegies realizes as the mission of poetic vocation, I offered to them that the practice of writing an elemental ode could facilitate the cultivation of simple virtues like gratitude and humility, virtues which are also important elements of Possibility.

I instructed students to imitate Neruda's poetic strategy: "use short lines and bold, even hyperbolic metaphors in your praising." I wanted to make clear to them the kind of metaphors-towards-truth-as-revealing I hoped that they would produce, and so I invoked Shelley's claim that poetry can make clear "the before unapprehended relations of things" This invocation was another way of encouraging my students to bring forth a new thought. My students surprised and delighted me with the strength of their odes, some of which I do think manage to manifest "before unapprehended relations." For example, Brodarick's "Ode to My Boots" exposes an earthy, violent relation:

Cow hide born
you used to graze
in greener pastures,
through your
eyes
the world
was seen
your soul felt
that which you
surrounded
Now your sole
feels that
which rests
beneath it.
Now you

are a guardian
protecting tender
meat
where before you
were the meat
in need of
guarding.

Brodarick's image of the boot as "a guardian // protecting tender / meat / where before you / were the meat / in need of guarding" makes manifest the unsettling proximity of dead and living flesh present in the association of foot and shoe. Kelsey Chapman's "Ode to Sleepers" portrays a more gentle relation:

Seas
of sheets,
rise up and break
softly
over your form.
Wombed.
The breast of your
sleep-mother
cradles and swaths
into – Nothing.
Oblivion, sweetly
Whispers,

Vast Quiets.

Until,

you regress back

to before Creation

before birth

before things,

thoughts or even

feels.

Before time spun

spiral seashell

forward down

through

you

To piece

you

into existence.

Among the noises

the blarings of street

corner

Radio hymns,

mothers,

personality, humans,

mouths-

But
In the Morning,
there is
Lavender
Light.
and you are not
yet –
Not yet
born.
Your lips still
soft
your brows do not
yet comprehend
a furrow
And your hands
know only
the work gently
curling
in.

Chapman's vision, which recalls to me Whitman's in "The Sleepers," focuses upon the innocence that attends us as we rest, calling attention to the way that each sleeper is like an unborn infant in the belly of a bed ("The breast of your / sleep-mother / cradles and swaths") in

touch with a primordial reality (“before things, / thoughts, or even / feels”). Daniel Radin’s “Ode to Bubble Gum” elaborates comically on the relation of texture and tongue, scent and sex:

From the linear womb
you abandon your
brothers and sisters,
sleeping soundly,
born one by one
and shed
your paper robe.
Like a snake,
skin reverts and becomes new.
Slimy.
Malleable.
Slave to my molars.
You stretch and *yawn* with ease,
reminiscing baseball ice cream, and baseball cards,
and Big League Chew.
You imprison lunch’s memory.
Igniting my tongue with your silent words.
Spicy and *bold*,
dancing the Macarena,
with a short skirt and sexy Latina kiss.
Flamboyant and glaring

as the embers you imitate. Tiny snaps! escape
typewriting an audible Morse code
beckoning *warmly* to the girl next door.
Who sidles closer.
but she, unlike I, detects hot, fresh cinnamon rolls,
and a scented candle of bubble baths past.
The blaze in my mouth is sweltering, overwhelming...
You open my mouth... and close the door.

The stick of gum is a furtive lover, sneaking out of its familial home (“you abandon / your brothers and sisters, / sleeping soundly”) only to disrobe and become debased in the mouth of the speaker (“Slimy. / Malleable. / A slave to my molars”) and ultimately, a force which attracts another lover (“the girl next door”). After Radin’s ode, I don’t think I shall ever be able to see gum as fully innocent ever again.

6.7 THE LYRIC ESSAY AS POETIC INQUIRY

In the culminating assignment of the semester for Reading the Soul of Poetry, I asked students to write and present a lyric essay. My idea for the assignment came only after I had been working for some weeks on a lyric essay of my own, “Flirting with Krishna.” In writing “Flirting with Krishna” I was attempting to think through my relationship with the troubled-yet-beautiful Hare Krishna bhakti yoga movement which I had encountered through friends during that fall semester. As I wrote the essay I consciously worked with the movements that I now call poetic

inquiry (though at that time I still had not yet articulated to myself that summarizing name for the process). I engaged in the movements of opening into Possibility via contemplative reading and meditation and then speaking forth from Possibility through poetic strategies in the hopes of approaching truth. As I participated in these movements and wrote I had a feeling of exhilaration—I experienced a vivid sense of discovery and clarity. I thought to myself, “Yes, this is it. This is what I have been trying to teach myself to do. This is what I want my students to be able to do.” I especially enjoyed the way that the lyric essay form made possible a kind of deployment of poetic strategy which could transmute the usual “prosiness” of exposition and history. Yet as I looked at the essay I had produced, I realized it was a rather sophisticated exploration of primary themes that concern me as an intellectual and a human being: language, soul, divinity, poetry, devotion, faith, failure and lack.

I briefly despaired of being able to communicate to my students how to think and write at this level of sophistication. Then it occurred to me that I could simply instruct them to mimic the poetic strategies of my essay, blow-by-blow. This would have the effect of removing for them an element of decision-making—they would not need to decide what poetic strategies to use when, for what purpose. But it would give them the opportunity, by “filling in the form” to see what power the use of poetic strategies might have to uncover for them new thoughts, new truths about their lives and concerns.

I also removed an element of decision-making for my students at the level of what their essays would be “about.” I gave them a set of questions to address (“Where and how do I experience my soul (deepest self) or experience my awareness of its absence (or my disbelief or disinterest in it)? What does that experience have to do with language? What is poetry and how is it present (or not) in my life? Where do I encounter language that resonates with my soul (or

conspicuously does not) and how do I relate to that language? What is going on with me and my life, how am I imagining myself and my relationship with the world? How is that imagination changing or expanding lately?") which were broadly identical to the ones I had posed to myself while writing "Flirting with Krishna" and which—not at all coincidentally, since I had designed the course as an inquiry about just these kind of questions—also related to themes we'd worked with throughout the term.

The resulting writing prompt was by far the longest and most complex I'd created for the class, and it succeeded in eliciting from my students responses whose depth and skill impressed me:

Final Assignment: Write and Present a Lyric Essay

Consideration

This class, Reading (the Soul) of Poetry, has invited us to experience and reflect upon encounters with poetry that are minimally encumbered by technical analysis or historical contextualization. We've practiced enhancing our receptivity and responsiveness to poems through a variety of contemplative and experimental means. Now we will focus our sensitivity on reading and responding to the poetic in our own lives via the writing and presentation of a lyric essay.

The lyric essay is a hybrid form which has become prominent in literary discourse within the past twenty years: like a conventional essay, it "essays" or "tries" to answer a question or a set of questions. It is not a form for presenting already-attained knowledge (which is what an "article" does) but it is rather a living, searching form which itself

attempts to generate new knowledge. On the page, lyric essay appears like “normal” essayistic prose—no special line breaks, and organized by paragraphs rather than by stanzas.

Unlike “normal” essayistic prose, the lyric essay often focuses on images, motifs, moods, and feelings rather than explicitly developed narrative, analysis or argument (though it can contain these elements). Its structure is cyclical, returning again and again to consider the same scenes, persons, places, encounters from various perspectives and to imaginatively tease out their multiple meanings and resonances-- rather than linear, single, or conclusive. The prose of a lyric essay is lyric or “poetic” in that it doesn’t have all the “padding” and connective tissue of a conventional essay. For this reason, it’s usually more brief and concise than a conventional essay.

The line between what is a “poem” and what is an “essay” therefore becomes quite thin and difficult. Many pieces published under the heading of lyric essays in magazines in recent years have been anthologized in books with titles like *America’s Best Poetry 2010*.

The trick of writing a great lyric essay is to take huge, abstract questions and to move towards answering them by looking with loving, imaginative, poetic and receptive attention at the particular, concrete circumstances of your life (which includes your current material surroundings and relationships as well as your memories, desires, hopes, night-time dreams). In other words: this assignment asks you to read your life (your own actions and relationships and dwellings) with generosity, curiosity, and willingness to be changed and provoked by what you see, just as we’ve practiced reading poems in this class. Accept that just as great poems do, your life contains images, situations and words

that are not reducible to a simple, unambivalent interpretation but are nevertheless important and compelling to consider. Then, in writing, show us the poem that is your life and how to read it.

The questions your lyric essay will seek to address are these: Where and how do I experience my soul (deepest self) or experience my awareness of its absence (or my disbelief or disinterest in it)? What does that experience have to do with language? What is poetry and how is it present (or not) in my life? Where do I encounter language that resonates with my soul (or conspicuously does not) and how do I relate to that language? What is going on with me and my life, how am I imagining myself and my relationship with the world? How is that imagination changing or expanding lately?

As individual personalities we have distinctive modes of experiencing (or not) that mysterious and reverberating energy called “soul.” We might encounter it more or less in situations of sex, nature, discipline and hard work, relationship, religious worship, dreams, meditation, or art. We also all experience life *through* language in many important ways. In this assignment, we will question and describe those experiences in a vivid way that invites our audience (the class) to enter with us into those places, into those relationships.

In presenting our lyric essays, we are seeking to “give” something of ourselves to the class, to lead the class through a dramatized virtual experience of our subjective questioning and understanding.

CAVEAT: Nowhere in your lyric essay can the words “soul” or “spirit” appear. You need to use concrete places, situations, objects and relationships in your life as metaphors or symbols of soul.

Instructions:

The poet Stephen Dobyns, in his book on writing, *Best Words, Best Order*, remarks, “If the poet can get us to believe about a small thing, we will be more likely to believe the poet about a big thing. One of the quickest ways to establish the reader’s trust is through precise description of physical setting. More difficult are precise descriptions of emotional and spiritual conditions. All three mean giving us a combination of the familiar and unfamiliar, what we know with what we do not know. These three types of description are best communicated with the help of metaphor. And it is probably through the quality of metaphor that the poet most quickly achieves or loses the trust of the reader” (139).

Therefore, follow these instructions:

1. Start your lyric essay by giving a precise physical description of a place which stirs or speaks to or troubles your soul (or which represents your disbelief or disinterest in such a thing). Tell us exactly what this place looks like, where it is, what goes on there. After you’ve given a physical description of the place, move on to give an emotional and spiritual description of it. Say what the place “is” to you, emotionally and spiritually, say what it “knows” about you. (This is using metaphor).

You might ask yourself: “How would Neruda describe this place in an elemental ode?”

Example: In my lyric essay, “Flirting with Krishna,” I start by giving a brief, precise physical description of the chanting room: “Unfurnished but for pillows, altar, harmonium it will fit eight (ten at most) seated on the floor on pillows next to its walls.” I then move on to giving an emotional, spiritual description of the place. This description is necessarily figurative and metaphorical: “The room hovers above the street in the dark. It’s a spaceship, a planet, an otherworld, a time.” I continue this description by saying what it “knows” about me: “It knows me, remembers me when I was a child playing with dead-mice in the falling down corridors...” These are metaphors.

2. Continue your lyric essay by circling around again and giving another, deeper and closer physical description of the place.

Example: I circle back to describing the altar more precisely: “the altar is a middle-class hearth mantle worked into a psychedelic event of unveiling... Above it reigns a print of a painting by Murlidhara Dasa...”

3. Detail how you came to be associated with this place, and what you do there.
What interesting piece of language do you encounter in this place? It could be a prayer, a slogan, something your friend says all the time, the lyrics to a song, a nickname people call you, a thought that runs through your mind, anything.

Example: I find the maha mantra: “Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare.”

4. Explain what this language “means”—not literally, but emotionally and / or spiritually to you. How does it strike you?

Example: I say of the mantra, “It’s something shabby, disreputable, too far out.”

5. Elaborate—why do you use those words you just used?

Example: I reflect, “*Far out* is something I say a lot these days, instead of *cool* or *great*. I say it maybe for the same reason I listened compulsively to the Beatles when I was twelve years old...”

6. Let the language be a metaphor for your being—in what ways are you *the same* as the piece of language which interests you?

Example: “Hare Krishna. I am something disreputable, shabby, too far out...”

7. Circle back, describe the piece of language and how it affects you again. Create another metaphor.

Example: “Hare Krishna. It’s something grand, loving, delighted, old: it’s sunk into me like syrup through a fried cake.”

8. Continue your essay in this way, moving between precise, detailed physical descriptions of the place and people and language which interest you and precise metaphorical emotional descriptions of the same phenomenon. In your experience of this place and the language that you encounter there, look for some truth about

what poetry might be. Think-with the features of that place as you reach for this truth.

Example: “Apparently nightingales, like devotees, also sing loudly in the hour before dawn. Devotees, also, seem to have an affinity for red roses. Or perhaps the God has an affinity for red roses that the devotees accommodate. Maybe God is to the devotee as the rose is to the nightingale. Are we impaling ourselves on his thorns as we sing? Maybe devotion is the only real poetry.”

In writing your lyric essay, hopefully you will discover something new about yourself, about soul, and about poetry. In *Best Words, Best Order*, Stephen Dobyns reminds us about the value of imaginative writing and the way that explorations of metaphor can offer fresh knowledge to us:

The process of writing is a process of discovery. One never begins knowing what the end product will be. It is found along the way. [...] The metaphor has been a great discovery on the part of the writer, and we, as readers, want to share in that discovery, not only because we hope to be entertained but also because that discovery may be useful in the living of our lives. The metaphor may be the transcription of a remembered event, it may be totally invented or it may fall someplace in between. What is important is the truth of the metaphor, not what gave rise to it. (153)

So as you write, keep in mind that you are discovering something precious to us that “may be useful in the living of our lives.”

About Lyric Essays

According to the *Seneca Review*, a magazine responsible for popularizing the lyric essay and naming it as a genre, the lyric essay does the following things:

- partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language.
- partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form.
- does not expound. It may merely mention. As Helen Vendler says of the lyric poem, "It depends on gaps. . . . It is suggestive rather than exhaustive."
- moves by association, leaping from one path of thought to another by way of imagery or connotation, advancing by juxtaposition or sidwinding poetic logic. Generally it is short, concise and punchy like a prose poem.
- accretes by fragments, taking shape mosaically - its import visible only when one stands back and sees it whole.
- may spiral in on itself, circling the core of a single image or idea, without climax, without a paraphrasable theme.
- stalks its subject like quarry but is never content to merely explain or confess. It elucidates through the dance of its own delving.
- is loyal to that original sense of essay as a test or a quest, an attempt at making sense, the lyric essay sets off on an uncharted course through interlocking webs of idea,

- circumstance, and language - a pursuit with no foreknown conclusion, an arrival that might still leave the writer questioning.
- ruminates, leaves pieces of experience undigested and tacit, inviting the reader's participatory interpretation.

From *The Seneca Review*: <http://www.hws.edu/academics/senecareview/lyricessay.aspx>

In the prompt I explain to students what exactly a lyric essay consists in, and I frame the project of writing one as the work of “reading and responding to the poetic in our own lives” just as we had already practiced reading and responding to poems. The instructions I here give as pertaining specifically to “writing a great lyric essay” could be taken as one way of summarizing the work of poetic inquiry in general:

The trick of writing a great lyric essay is to take huge, abstract questions and to move towards answering them by looking with loving, imaginative, poetic and receptive attention at the particular, concrete circumstances of your life (which includes your current material surroundings and relationships as well as your memories, desires, hopes, night-time dreams).

In this passage I invited students to practice directing the “loving, imaginative, poetic and receptive attention” that characterizes Possibility toward “the particular, concrete circumstances of your life” in the service of answering “huge, abstract questions.” I am interested to notice that this particular description of the work of poetic inquiry does not “hold in place” the two movements as I have described them earlier in this dissertation. I have said that the two

movements of poetic inquiry are 1) Entering into Possibility and 2) Creatively expressing truth using poetic strategies. I have spoken about these movements in such a way that suggest they are sequential and orderly. This is perhaps a misleading way of speaking about the movements of poetic inquiry. It is useful to the degree that it allows us to discuss and make plain just exactly what poetic inquiry entails, but it is limiting and deceptive in that it suggests a linear sequence to the movements. As the above-quoted passage from the lyric essay assignment suggests, the movements of poetic inquiry are circular. It's not always that one moves into Possibility and *then* starts asking and answering truth via poetic strategy: it can also be that the question(s) themselves motivate the shift into Possibility, and that the kind of expressing-forth which we have called poetic strategy is in some ways a kind of "natural" or "spontaneous" way of speaking from the particular and concrete as experienced in the condition of Possibility. In this way, "poetic strategies" are not so "strategic" after all— rather than being clever or ornamental modes of articulation, they are utterances more fundamental, more innocent, more aligned with the original motivations of language (which is all "fossil poetry" as both Emerson and Vico averred).

Jane Hirshfield affirms this in her essay "Poetry and the Mind of Indirection":

To recognize imaginative encirclement [i.e., poetic strategy] as a primary mode of thought is to remake one's relationship to knowing. It is to understand that the cognitive tropes particular to poetry are as aboriginal as its music—not illustration, not the ornamentation of abstract thought, but central devices for ordering the plenitude of being. Western culture, utilitarian by long practice and desire, believes in 'cold facts,' and such thinking brings its gifts. But the mind's primary knowing is hot, as fluid and protean as the changing magma of the earth. Art, by its very existence, undoes the idea that there can be only one description of the real, some single and simple truth on whose surface we

may thoughtlessly walk. (111-112)

Hirshfield recognizes that “the cognitive tropes particular to poetry” (i.e., poetic strategies) are “central devices for ordering the plenitude of being” and through such ordering making the communication of lived experience possible, an experience which is “is hot, as fluid and protean as the changing magma of the earth.” To some degree then, expression which deploys poetic strategies is just the result of an attempt to be true to a level of experience that resists and perplexes abstraction. In asking my students to attend receptively to the concrete and particular details of their lives in the service of answering abstract questions, I am asking them to participate in the resistance of abstraction.

For example, in the first writing prompt of the semester I asked students to write about what they understood by the term “soul” and allowed them free reign in choosing the genre of their response. Some students chose to respond poetically, in language that resists abstraction and focuses on the particulars of fluid and protean experience (for example, Swysgood’s response). Others, like Radin, offered very dry and abstract definitions of “soul” (“a noun, spiritual in nature”).

In this last writing prompt of the semester, I also asked students to write about soul, but I also gave them a strong caveat: “Nowhere in your lyric essay can the words ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ appear. You need to use concrete places, situations, objects and relationships in your life as metaphors or symbols of soul.” In issuing this rule, I sought to block off the option of veering into prosaic abstraction and instead guided students to focus on allowing the particulars of their experience to stand as “metaphors or symbols of soul.” “Soul” itself is an abstraction, of course—it’s one which I find useful and compelling for my thought about life and poetry and which many others find troubling or even repulsive. Of course the difficult thing about “soul” as

an abstraction is that it's hard to give it an abstract definition that's meaningful. The reason for this is that it can't be encompassed, only pointed to. The process of poetic inquiry, the work of symbolic articulation, is a process of pointing by which soul is made (briefly, fleetingly) apparent, available for perception and intuition. Soul is made apparent in the *movement* of pointing, gesturing which poetry enacts. Perhaps weirdly, this is true both of poetry which deliberately takes soul as its subject (as would my students' lyric essays) and of poetry which has quite other subjects altogether. In some sense, "soul" is always the subject of poetry, since it is the background which makes possible the movement of poetic inquiry and which becomes apparent as the movement moves. As background, it becomes visible when the foreground of language allows itself to transparently be language. Language which is transparently language is language which has become self-reflexive and therefore opaque as a medium of ordinary communication. I think the editors of *The Seneca Review*, in their description of what it is that language in a lyric essay does (which I shared with my students at the conclusion of the prompt) speaks to this process of the making-apparent-of-soul-through poetry when they say that the lyric essay "elucidates through the dance of its own delving." To "elucidate" means to "throw light upon" and I would suggest that the "light" which is thrown in any poetic articulation is what Emerson and I refer to by the term "soul."

The lyric essay prompt I designed for my students not only asked them to focus on allowing the concrete particulars of their experience to stand as metaphors of soul (or not-soul, depending on their inclination), it also asked them to think about how they themselves are constituted in and through language they encounter in the world. Perhaps the most interesting instruction in the prompt is this: "Let the language be a metaphor for your being—in what ways are you *the same* as the piece of language which interests you?" With this instruction I invited

my students to a level of endeavor which I regard as especially sophisticated because it not only asks them to deploy receptive attention and poetic strategies in the service of a question, it also asks them to consider themselves in a relationship of identity with the language that engages their attention—in other words, it requests that they use a poetic strategy (metaphor) to elucidate some feature of their own self-in-relation with language. This project, using the strategies of poetry to think essayistically about self and language is the kind of poetic inquiry engaged in by my favorite poet-philosophers: Kierkegaard, Oscar Wilde, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. It's high-level work to ask of undergrads in their first Reading Poetry class. Nonetheless, many of them rose to the occasion.

Leah Nesmith produced a response to the prompt which loosely followed my blow-by-blow instructions for the use of poetic strategy and which participated in the overall project of meditating on large questions about soul and poetry via the concrete particulars of life. Nesmith's response is interesting to me in part because its use of poetic strategy does not come off as the natural or spontaneous result of a shift into Possibility of the kind I have just discussed. Rather, Nesmith's poetic strategies—especially her metaphors—come across as forced—as if she would never in a million years offer them except that the assignment instructions specifically asked her to do so. What I wish to suggest, however, is that for all its lack of facility and for all the places where it falls short of offering really penetrating insight, Nesmith's essay does, like Brodarick's Dream Question poem, show evidence of the *practice* of poetic inquiry, and even this practice is valuable in itself for the practioner, though it may not yet yield fruit that is moving to others. I reproduce her response below:

In My Own Little Corner

It's a small room, however large for its kind. A rectangular 40 ft, dark blue carpet, maple colored base boards, centered about a large picture window. White walls accented with sheer blue curtains; the back wall is lined with jeans and sweaters, while the connecting wall contains skirts and dresses. To most people, this is just a closet; a place to simply store your clothes not your thoughts. To me, my closet is the most important room in the house. The small room carries a calming effect. I can see myself there on a breezy morning; the windows open as wide as they go, the curtains blowing in the breeze. I sit there before work, often time with my Bible, collecting my thoughts. My closet is me; it is the keeper of my most important thoughts and materialistic objects. It's the one place I can be myself, the walls know all of my secrets.

The dark blues carpet is soft, soft enough to sleep on; I've spent plenty of nights stretched out under the window. At one point about eight years ago blue was my favorite color, as I learned more about myself, I realized I'm not a fan of blue. The carpet remains that color as a reminder of how far I've come. My favorite quote is taped along the base board of the back wall, in a place only I can see. The room is situated so that the window faces east; therefore, it's among the first rooms in the house to see sunlight. When the light shines through the curtains, it makes the walls look a bright blue color. On warm summer days my clothes are warmed by the direct sunlight. There is a small dent in the wall by the door, evidence of my clumsiness and a splash of iced tea right below the window seal. It's the only place where I can make a mess and leave it.

When I was a little girl, my closet was the size of a matchbox. Every night before bed I would get my journal and work my way into the small space. Sometimes I'd write about my day but more often than not I would sit in the dark space and think; I would let the silence work on me. When my parents decided to move and build a new house, they promised they'd give me more of my own space. I first discovered poetry in my closet; I keep an old shoe box containing all of my favorites, I reference them from time to time to help me relax. The one that means the most to me is taped to the top of the box. The lines of it have come to narrate my life, inspiring me to keep going even when life gets hard. Every day when I enter my space this is the first thing I read, it immediately calms my nerves:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Invictus (William Ernest Henley) is a simple poem that carries a lot of meaning. It is straight to the point; however, it has an effect on you each and every time you read it. Henley did not use long, fancy words yet the words seem to penetrate my outer being and communicate directly with my inner being. *Invictus* has an old English feel; it's from a time where image was everything. It sends a message of endurance, of an undying hope that no matter how dark the nights may be, we are still in control of our fate. In many ways, *Invictus* represents my closet. It holds all the accessories that make me who I am on the outside, but if you look a little deeper you find who I really am, nestled in an old shoe box, hidden behind my jeans. I'm a strong believer in faith; one thing I admire about the language of this poem is his faith. His words speak with such authority, showing that he believes that he is in control of his life. I feel a connection with these thoughts of empowerment, I feel freed by simply reading these words.

Authority is a synonym for power. Lately I find that I like being in a position of authority. I was always really good at following directions; however, I always hated it. From the time I was in pre-school I had to be the leader, I had to be the one giving the orders. I'm an only child; many people like to tell me that's why I have an obsession with being in charge. They also told me that once I got out into the real world that would change, sadly, they were wrong. I still have the same need to be the best, to be in control and keep everyone in line, the only difference is now I have the will and determination to

do so outside of my parents protection. This poem is giving not only its writer authority, but it is transferring that authority to whoever reads it. This is probably why all of my favorite movies include a single main character who leads the rest of the crowd; such as *Malcolm X*, *Kill Bill* and *Waiting to Exhale*. I grew up with a strong leading lady and I find it impossible to settle for anything less.

I'm strong, determined, ambitious, confident and inspiring. *Invictus* is everything I am, I find myself to be an old school girl. I admire the way the world used to be, the drive people used to have. Now we are so quick to throw in the towel, but the language of *Invictus* is that of a fighter. When I first began reading this poem, I had no idea why the words affected me the way they did. Even though I didn't know it yet, I had something in common with these lines and every time life got too hard to handle I reverted back to the basics. I went back home, shut myself in my closet, grabbed my box and began to read. I allowed the words to bring out the strength in me, it taught me to dig deeper within myself to find the part of me that related, the part of me that would not and would never stop fighting. As the years go on, I become more and more convinced that this poem was written to guide someone just like me.

Invictus captured my heart in the way in which frog snatches a fly. I was new to poetry, I was a young girl, and I really had no idea what I was looking for. I had little or no expectations; before I knew it; I was grabbed, taken in by this work of art that I have yet to completely figure out. It happened with lightning speed, one minute I was searching the internet, the next minute I'm rereading this poem line by line, dictionary in hand, trying to make sense of what was going on inside of me. When I first stumbled

upon this poem I hadn't been through much in my life, I had no idea I possessed the qualities I so admired on paper.

I've been in touch with my special place for eight years now, and in all this time I have only invited one person to join me. However close my parents and I may be, I felt that they could never understand why my closet was so special to me. Actually I'm quite sure they think I sit there and stare at my mountains of unworn clothes and plan what pointless purchase shall be next. My best friend on the other hand, understands it completely. We both have massive collections of clothes and shoes, it helps that we are the same size and can swap clothes whenever necessary; we are both control freaks and we are both fighters. We understand the importance of portraying ourselves in a certain light, we know how to dress the part even when we ourselves are unprepared. Those reasons are why I can invite her into my space. Many people are slightly confused when we say that we're best friends. She's a 5' 7" blonde, with long legs and green eyes. She doesn't like to get dirty, she doesn't like to be in the kitchen and the sight of children annoys her. We seem to be polar opposites.

It was late on a Thursday night, I had just suffered a bad break up and the loss of a loved one in the very same day; rather appropriately it stormed so hard the power went out. In order to get myself together, I laid on the closet floor, looking at the lightening outside my window in an attempt to get my thoughts together. I had left my phone sitting on the bed, so I had no idea that she had called me about a million times. She finally gave up on calling, deciding to pay me a visit. She let herself in my room, walked right into my closet and laid on the floor next to me. Neither one of us said anything, didn't even look at each other, when all of a sudden she begins to recite it. When I realized what she

was saying, I snapped my head toward her, thinking that she had found my box. Much to my surprise, she hadn't even seen the box; she was simply speaking from memory. I started quoting the lines with her; that was the moment I knew we would be friends forever. We looked at each other and came up with an agreement. We would sleep in the closet that night, I could cry, scream, say whatever I needed to but in the morning when we left the closet, we would put it behind us and keep going.

It's impossible to accurately describe how I felt when I heard her speak those words. It was almost as if one heart was talking to another. From the outside looking in, it's hard to see why her and I are so close, but that night explained what brought us together. We lived by the same motto, we admired the same things, we happened to be inspired by the same exact words even though we had never discussed them together. We had learned something new about each other; we got a better understanding of not only each other but of ourselves.

Since I've been away at school, I've been working on a new place to be myself. It's too hard to drive home every time I need a reality check. I've actually decided that my dorm is a bit too big, and after a semester of searching I gave up. Instead of focusing on a place, I found an object. Something that I can carry with me, so that when I need it most, I can always be reminded of that feeling. It has a lime green color, embroidered with a pink flower. It feels like cheap velvet, I've actually described it as one of the ugliest things I've ever seen. I thought it was misplaced as I looked for a new Bible in Barnes & Noble. I picked it off the top shelf to see what it was, surprisingly enough, it was a Bible. Despite its ugliness, I decided to buy it. It somewhat mocked the way I live my life, always judging books by their cover.

My idea of poetry was born in my closet many years ago; even as I grow and my opinion changes, the essentials have stayed the same. It doesn't have to rhyme, it doesn't have to make sense to the rest of the world, it doesn't have to be dressed up or presented a certain way and it doesn't even have to be spoken. Poetry is what I feel as I sit on my floor; it's the thoughts so new and pure that I can't find a way to put them into words. Poetry is deepened when you're able to share it with someone else, without ever speaking a word. True poetry warms my heart the way the sun warms my face as I stare out of my window. Poetry is all around us, we just have to be ready to receive it.

As I have said, Nesmith's response to the prompt is not a fluid or masterful one. When she writes, "In many ways, *Invictus* represents my closet. It holds all the accessories that make me who I am on the outside, but if you look a little deeper you find who I really am, nestled in an old shoe box, hidden behind my jeans" I am not wholly convinced. The metaphor is mixed, confused. Not only is it unclear how the poem "Invictus," like the closet "holds all the accessories that make me who I am on the outside" (what element of the poem would be analogous to the "accessories"?) but it is also somewhat strange that while she is claiming that the poem represents the closet, she also points to the poem as that which is present *within* the closet, "nestled in an old shoe box, hidden behind my jeans" which is "who I really am." So the poem is both the closet itself and the secret, genuine self hidden in a box within the closet—which is, actually, where Nesmith keeps her copy of the poem. This confused metaphor looks to me like a place where Nesmith is struggling to overcome her attachment to the literal and not fully succeeding.

Like Aradhana Purker, Nesmith protested to me early in the semester that did not see herself as creative or imaginative. She reported that she had once loved to write poetry when she

was a child but she had stopped early in her teen years when the death of someone very close to her made it too painful to open to her feelings in the way she felt poetry writing demanded. She wanted to know if she could do the work of the class without having to write poetically. I let her know that that wouldn't be possible. She decided that she wanted to stay in the class and work through her creative block. The day she shared with us her Dream Questions poem in the Read Around was a dramatic one, for in that poem she wrote about the very grief that had silenced her for years.

Because (as she told me, and as she affirms in her lyric essay) she hated to feel vulnerable or out-of-control, Nesmith found the work of poetic inquiry—which requires that we enter the vulnerable and receptive condition of Possibility—to be difficult and frightening. The fact that she was willing to stay in the class and practice it at all attests to her own courage. I regard it as great progress for Nesmith to attempt to deploy a poetic strategy in service of poetic inquiry (“‘Invictus’ represents my closet”) even if the strategy does not wholly succeed in elucidating anything. Even if she is not offering a successful poetic inquiry, she is at least, through the impetus of the assignment, experimenting with poetic strategy as a mode of thinking about her relationship to language and to life, and this is a mode which causes her to stretch the habitual bounds of her thought. That the initial outcome may be clumsy for someone not already inclined to use poetic strategy as a mode of discovery is perhaps unavoidable given the complex dance of question and intuition that poetic inquiry requires. It leaves open the possibility for future growth, should Nesmith continue to experiment with poetic inquiry.

For me, the first arresting moment in Nesmith's essay comes as she considers the effect upon her of William Ernest Henley's "Invictus": "His words speak with such authority, showing that he believes that he is in control of his life. I feel a connection with these thoughts of empowerment, I feel freed by simply reading these words." From here, she moves on to discuss her own desire for power and control within her life. This discussion then leads somewhat abruptly to an additional insight about the poem's affective power: "This poem is giving not only its writer authority, but it is transferring that authority to whoever reads it." This insight bears some similarity to a thought that Emerson expresses in "The Over-Soul": "The great poet makes us feel our own wealth, and then we think less of his compositions." Nesmith's recognition, however, differs from Emerson's in that her experience of empowerment via Henley's poem does not cause her to think less of the poem itself. To the contrary, Nesmith's realization of the poem's power causes her to value it all the more acutely, to read it with ritual intensity, and to constitute her own identity in dialogue with it:

Even though I didn't know it yet, I had something in common with these lines and every time life got too hard to handle I reverted back to the basics. I went back home, shut myself in my closet, grabbed my box and began to read. I allowed the words to bring out the strength in me, it taught me to dig deeper within myself to find the part of me that related, the part of me that would not and would never stop fighting. As the years go on, I become more and more convinced that this poem was written to guide someone just like me.

Thus Nesmith enters into a relationship with "Invictus" in which the poem is not merely a brief source of inspirational frisson, but rather a perpetually valuable teacher, something which

educates her by drawing out “the part of me that related, the part of me that would not and would never stop fighting.”

The second arresting moment in Nesmith’s essay for me comes when during a time of crisis she discovers that her best friend’s devotional knowledge of “Invictus” parallels her own:

She let herself in my room, walked right into my closet and laid on the floor next to me. Neither one of us said anything, didn’t even look at each other, when all of a sudden she begins to recite it. When I realized what she was saying, I snapped my head toward her, thinking that she had found my box. Much to my surprise, she hadn’t even seen the box; she was simply speaking from memory. I started quoting the lines with her; that was the moment I knew we would be friends forever.

As a reader, I am just as surprised as Nesmith when her friend begins spontaneously reciting “Invictus” to her. I think it may be safe to say that the poetry of William Ernest Henley is not widely fashionable. That Nesmith’s friend knows the poem by heart and recites it to her as she suffers does, then, seem a meaningful coincidence, almost uncanny. Nesmith’s reflection on what the shared knowledge of the poem means to her provides some clue to this uncanniness:

It’s impossible to accurately describe how I felt when I heard her speak those words. It was almost as if one heart was talking to another. From the outside looking in, it’s hard to see why her and I are so close, but that night explained what brought us together. We lived by the same motto, we admired the same things, we happened to be inspired by the same exact words even though we had never discussed them together. We had learned something new about each other; we got a better understanding of not only each other but of ourselves.

The recognition “It was almost as if one heart was talking to another” might sound sentimental, and perhaps would be if Nesmith were discussing a moment of intimate silence. Instead she’s describing an experience of spontaneously voicing a poem along with someone else. The “talking” happens within the mutually known words of the poem. The hearts are talking to another in monologue rather than dialogue. Connection is realized in and through the shared poem. Nesmith’s essay does not so much enact a process of poetic inquiry for us readers on the page so much as it reflects upon an experience in which Nesmith felt the power of the fruit of another’s poetic inquiry (i.e. “Invictus”).

Molly Burkett, a student who began the class with an already-present inclination to poetic and creative work, produced a stunning response to the prompt which does enact a process of poetic inquiry on the page. We might say that Burkett’s response succeeds because the questions whose answers she searches for in this essay (“Why do I live to be in love? What is it about that ever-elusive, shifting feeling that has shown itself to me in countless men’s faces that I deathgrip to?”) have a vital importance and resonance to her, as do the metaphors she makes as she seeks for answers to these questions. I reproduce Burkett’s lyric essay below:

How to Stand Out in a Crowd

“Breath taker, dead anchor”—Justin Vernon

Trafford, PA

A harsh, deep wooden floor mirrored, set apart by, hanging cabbages. They may have been pretty if they hadn’t been rotting. Someone comes and checks on the chickens

daily, but the house has no heat or electricity. How were the lights on then, I wonder. It was filled to the tipping brim with vegan food and friendship. I was almost suffocating in the hazy orange din of spiced cakes and dying bare light bulbs. The cupboards were my favorite shade of antique, 1930's green, and the linoleum was golden enough to warm the whole circle of pea coats and laced up boots. We ventured into the basement and I was disappointed with not what we found, but the lack of walls, lack of tiny cellar rooms lined with shelves. There were the mason jars for the imagined shelves, but none were pickling beets or hot pepper jellies or black raspberries. So close to home, 911 Oak St., but not close at all. Maybe that's the way a new place feels. A glass half empty, but no cigar. When I say, "I always forget we're in a city," it's a good thing. This is the newest I've felt since the New Year and I'll take this awkwardness with a grain of salt. I'm an emotion that is somewhere between elation and a fucking wreck. HOME. I crave it, a place to fit into it and I'm really trying, but I get caught up in my own barbed wire, feigning confidence, more frequently than I'd like. This place is still beautiful and I want to bring out my notebook from my inner coat pocket, molest it with my words, but I'm too scared to be conspicuous. So it sits, my tan moleskin, wriggling against my ribs, searching for the same kind of company that I am.

We're back upstairs now, out of the tangle of bike frames and support beams and AJ is standing on a rocking chair, ring-leading, until he shuts the brass-knobbed door in Josh's face. I fail him to fall, and I feel guilty thinking this, but simultaneously I am exalted. I will pretend I can see through him, give myself some twisted upper hand—But he might not be so bad, and my preconceptions are dissolved by the warble of a Wurlitzer

under his fingers. This place is a Buddhist temple, and I'm the new monk, sweeping under everyone's feet. We wouldn't kill anything, except for our futures, hung out like lace laundry, but that doesn't exist just like one-week-old babies, and it is justified. We stand among the most vivid shades of decay and bask in its hue. There is history here behind every flake of paint; we have now become part of it. Its vastness unsettles me, but this wallpapered matriarch holds me still, although she does not belong to me. She is a plump woman, hiding each anxiety under folds of skin. I love her for her feeble attempts at solace, but I can still feel them sticking me like woodburnt-pokers. We're young but old, kind but cold, right but not validated enough to be so. "There is a difference between social anxiety and not fucking trying." And it's right about then that I'm sure I'm in love with you.

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On the drive home that I said that sentence to you, and it's maybe the most intelligent thing that's passed my lips in a long time, apart from your tongue. I saw your mind ingest it, taste it, and be not picky about it. You liked it, and that sticks like salt. I see these things about you because we are sensual. We are the soft sweat in your blanket and I'm the reason the comforter stripes are always facing wrong. Salt is the only thing I eat a lot of these days, I think about salt a lot. It is honesty, exalted. For once, I was and am still, right about this. It's why most college girls sell themselves short, jealousy and insecurity. Hell, it's why even I'm jealous. I put less thought into these words, weak definitions of jealousy because I'm deflecting. Don't let me be one of them, not that unappreciative girl who passes up beauty in intelligent company. I'll silently fall

someone like a tree to feel bigger than a Redwood. I'm ashamed of this truth and am immediately tired of talking. Insecurity sucks up all my energy and to think I was being productive. It's now just the silence with you and those quick moments when I see your head tilt my way from the corners of my eye. I look and you're suddenly staring at the road, honking at the out-of-state drivers who never know where they're going.

(Avoidance, my specialty, I'll talk myself out of talking to you.) We call them assholes, but at least they're fucking trying.

We all are, I'm fighting off my social anxiety enough to be your woman, and you, I don't know your idiosyncrasies, but I'm sure you're fighting something. I respect you more than almost anyone I've ever met. Why do I live to be in love? What is it about that ever elusive, shifting feeling that has shown itself to me in countless men's faces that I deathgrip to? It's the purpose; life alone has no purpose, but in the senses, I am endless. I live for bodies, their mechanics, and how each sense spike up like weeds until I'm weeding them out of my poetry, "There is a difference," between being loose and being barren underneath the unflattering sweaters. I am neither, but some sultry, quiet, comfortable pupa of the two. "Social anxiety and not fucking trying." When I am naked, I am no anxious, but for you, I surely am trying.

Conversation on Death

I usually have alternate reasons behind all of my tattoos, a "911" for all those lost in the terrorist attacks. But you get the real deal; I hope they impress you. I tattooed "BECOMING HUMAN" on my chest because some day I'm going to die. I fake

permanence because I have nothing else to hold on to. It's not "faking" in the sense that I am not sincere, it's fake in the fact that careers and parents sell out tattoos for being forever, more than diamonds, more than marriage, when we all know that is not true. Nothing is permanent, not our impact, not our surnames, and definitely not the body or thoughts. After death, these things become skewed, and even I, living can't understand my own, let alone the looming genius of a dead man. Although ink may last the longest in the form of text and word, my skin will decay under a tall Oak tree; the ink will blend into the soil and maybe give the Worms a sickness in their stomachs. They can't read so they don't know how "human" I am. If it weren't illegal, I'd be buried sans-coffin. The Worms will thank me later when they can keep down the toxic waste of the complex thoughts-turned-compost, all because I chose to be "ugly."

Too Long Silence

What is it about your lack of words that makes me so concerned? Trying to be socially anxious is how I spend my time. Is it because every time I keep my mouth shut for longer than 5 minutes, you start questioning my emotional stability? Or is it because I want something to be wrong, just so we can speak. I read once that constant talking does not a conversation make. I was crest fallen, a dejected 'oh' escaping my lips. It'd be worse to hear you say it; to hear you say I'm frustrating or too much or just not enough. In your silence, I force feed sentences in your mouth and they make me cry. We pull into the parking lot of the quad and you ask me if I had fun tonight and say "sure." I know you hate that word, but sometimes I use it to hide. Sure doesn't mean yes or no, but somewhere in the realm of agreeing just to make sure things aren't disagreeing. I'll

always reassure you when I don't mean "sure," when I do mean it, I'll elaborate on what I'm hiding from. I hope you never say "sure," because I'll remember how you translate it, and I'll know that it's not promising.

Mnenophobia

Is the fear of memories. William Wordsworth has to rely on them to create poetry because he can only remember beauty, as it was when he was a child. I guess I'm the same, even though I feel it's cheap. But my fingernails are dirty and I haven't shaved in a week and I remember that I have someone to impress. I'm afraid of forgetting to take care of myself, afraid of being shunned, sexually outcaste, and undesirable. I am also terrified of bees. In dreams, their stings mean falling in love. I dreamed them up in your bed last night, there was a hornets nest hanging from your curtains. Would you, Wordsworth, write an Ode to my Youth if I ever crossed your path? I doubt it.

Rockland, PA with Josh

Once we went to a swimming hole, newly friends. I never used a rope swing before and I tried not to say anything to dash my bravery. I think we had kissed the night before and I just wanted you close. My bathing suit must have made something out of my timidity. The less clothes I wear, the better I seem to feel, but in a way that is like a toddler taking off her shirt because she knows no better. You make me young, and I just want to be memorable, something constant, an altar to our raucous childishness that never gets growing pains in the grocery store lines, but always asks silly questions. I'm okay

with what my words are becoming. We're both obsessed with it, and again, I know now why it is that I love you. You are a facet of Youth that I am not, and I fill your gaps left by age, realization, and jadedness. We try not to be, but it's kind of inevitable. I'm the ever-curious girl, snooping, but pardoned. You have a full head of summer hair and liveliness captured like in the photo album under your bed. I can feel my metaphors groaning under the smiling pressure of fond memories. Ty grow up and out of my works in fiddleheads of innocence to palm open, mature but ever reminiscent of the violin song's of adolescence.

West End, PA

Beside your bed, at your apartment in the West End, leaning on its haunches, there is a mirror. It is at home with us in its frame. I tongue my teeth; the one I lost last night in my dream is still there. I'm not sure what I'm even looking at, our bodies blended into a curve. You give me an eye for detail that only the imagist could appreciate. Replace the fear of the unknown with curiosity and I let myself explore the topography of your body, the moles, bone craters, and ridges. There is a difference between social anxiety and not being selfish for once. I give you endless backrubs and only ask for what I need, not excess, not flourishes. I'll be your keeper. I look down and my clothes have fallen away, and there is something revealing about being revealed.

Burkett's "How to Stand Out in a Crowd" is a non-linear meditation on the relation of self and place, privacy and disclosure, mortality and sexual desire, anxiety and love. It's so rich with trope and figuration that it's difficult for me to pick out just a few instances to discuss in-

depth. I want to let it stand as a particularly successful example of what poetic inquiry can achieve when embraced without reservation.

The essay begins in a somewhat mysterious house in Trafford, Pa. We get the impression (the writing in the essay as a whole operates in an impressionistic mode—details of agency are fuzzy) that the house is some kind of collective or co-op (“It was filled to the tipping brim with vegan food and friendship”), with rotting hanging cabbages and a collection of chickens. In Burkett’s perception this is a promising start—but a descent into the basement of the house reveals that it lacks essential elements of rural domesticity: jars of pickles and preserves. The disappointment stings. Burkett expresses this disappointment with a metaphor that identifies her wholly with her complex feeling: “I’m an emotion that is somewhere between elation and being a fucking wreck. HOME. I crave it, a place to fit into it and I’m really trying, but I get caught up in my own barbed wire, feigning confidence, more frequently than I’d like.” This metaphor is a deployment of poetic strategy which compels me as a reader to consider the troubling way in which emotions can overwhelm and consume identity. In this passage Burkett also introduces the theme of “trying” which recurs multiple times throughout the essay as she ruminates on an observation: “There is a difference between social anxiety and not fucking trying.”

It’s difficult to tell who first makes this observation— at the conclusion of the essay’s first section (*Trafford, PA*) I think that it is Josh, Burkett’s romantic interest, who utters it, because directly after she reports it she writes “And it’s right about then that I’m sure I’m in love with you.” The conventional narrative of “becoming sure that one is in love with someone” which is etched in my mind suggests to me that the potential beloved does something clever or endearing and then-- “right about then”—the lover falls in love. But then at the start of the second section (*I-376*) Burkett reports, “On the drive home I said that sentence to you, and it’s

maybe the most intelligent thing that's passed my lips in a long time, apart from your tongue.”

By “that sentence” I am not certain if Burkett means the observation about social anxiety and not trying, or if she means the sentence “I love you.” In the first instance, it would mean that at the conclusion of the previous section of the essay, she realizes that she's in love with Josh as *she* says something (thus undermining my imagined sequence of potential-beloved-does-something-to-garner-love). In the second instance (i.e., if what she said was “I love you”) Josh's response seems rather understated: “You liked it, and that sticks like salt.” As a reader, I am left uncertain about who said what when. One might be inclined to read this as a flaw in Burkett's writing, a lack of clarity. I'm instead inclined to read the uncertainty about who said what as part of Burkett's poetic strategy—it's a gesture that creates for me as the reader an experience of curious instability—I want to know, I want to put things into an orderly, conventional narrative—but I am unable to do so. By creating this experience for me as a reader Burkett succeeds in engendering a process of poetic inquiry *in me*. I share in the work of trying to puzzle things out. Playing upon Frost's maxim “No tears for the writer, no tears for the reader” we might say, “No confusion for the writer, no confusion for the reader.” As I read “How to Stand Out in a Crowd” I am thrown into a position of not-knowing via Burkett's use of gesture which perhaps reproduces in me the state of not-knowing that Burkett seems to experience in her tenuous love affair.

In the section of the essay titled *Too Long Silence* the matter of speech between the lovers and who says what when is explored as a ground of contestation, a source of anxiety and trying (“What is it about your lack of words that makes me so concerned? Trying to be socially anxious is how I spend my time”). Josh's reticence causes Burkett to invent utterances on his behalf—ironically, utterances which hurt here: “In your silence, I force feed sentences in your mouth and

they make me cry.” Burkett further dramatizes the tension of silence and speech, honesty and dishonesty in her reflection on her use of the word “sure” in response to her lover’s queries: “Sure doesn’t mean yes or no, but somewhere in the realm of agreeing just to make sure things aren’t disagreeing.”

In the following section of the essay, *Mnenophobia*, Burkett considers her own reluctance to use childhood memories as a source of poetic inspiration as William Wordsworth did. This is her “fear of memories”—but in this section we also find that what she remembers—even day to day details—inspires fear for her: “But my fingernails are dirty and I haven’t shaved in a week and I remember that I have someone to impress. I’m afraid of forgetting to take care of myself, afraid of being shunned, sexually outcaste, and undesirable.” Burkett is not just afraid to use memories as a source of poetic inspiration—she’s also afraid *of* what she remembers, that “I have someone to impress.” Though in the previous section of the essay Burkett imposed sentences upon her lover, she now considers that William Wordsworth would not wish to impose sentences upon her: “Would you, Wordsworth, write an Ode to my Youth if I ever crossed your path? I doubt it.”

The theme of memory appears again in the penultimate section, *Rockland, PA with Josh*, wherein Burkett reflects on stripping as a form of revelation (as she will also do in the final section *West End, PA*): “The less clothes I wear, the better I seem to feel, but in a way that is like a toddler taking off her shirt because she knows no better. You make me young, and I just want to be memorable, something constant, an altar to our raucous childishness that never gets growing pains in the grocery store lines, but always asks silly questions.” Burkett’s desire to be “young” and “memorable” in the company of her lover aligns her with Wordsworth’s project in the *Prelude* of longing for and remembering the innocence of youth in a way that the essay does

not explicitly acknowledge. Furthermore, the wish to be “something constant” seems to hold an interesting tension with Burkett’s observations in an earlier section of the essay, *Conversation on Death*, wherein she acknowledges, “Nothing is permanent, not our impact, not our surnames, and definitely not the body or thoughts.” Is there a difference between something constant and something permanent? Burkett’s writing raises this question for me—she puts the functions of my mind purposively into swing as I contemplate her symbols—the decaying, tattooed corpse and the body of a lover disrobing.

Burkett’s essay concludes in an intimate scene: looking into a bedroom mirror, Burkett views herself and her lover together in an embrace. In this mirror view she comes into poetic perception (“You give me an eye for detail that only the imagist could appreciate”) which heralds a climactic moment: Burkett overcomes some of the anxiety and fear she described earlier. This moment is marked by a movement into the imperative mood. Almost as if giving instructions to herself (or us, or her lover—it may be all at once) she offers an order which serves simultaneously as narration: “Replace the fear of the unknown with curiosity and I let myself explore the topography of your body, the moles, bone craters, and ridges.” Shortly following this movement from fear to curiosity, Burkett concludes the essay with a sentence that uses physical nudity as an image for the revelation of intimacy: “I look down and my clothes have fallen away, and there is something revealing about being revealed.”

Burkett’s final insight that “there is something revealing about being revealed” plays upon the relationship between the tangible and intangible worlds: becoming more vulnerable in the present and material realm (allowing her clothes to fall away) is “revealing” because she thereby simultaneously tastes a greater vulnerability at the emotional and spiritual level. It is a poetic insight because in it Burkett uses poetic strategy (punning—a form of gesture,

and also metaphor, a trope) to exploit the inherent ambiguity of her medium (words), to express a facet of her phenomenal experience (the charged situation of undressing in front of a new lover) which is likewise ambiguous or polyvalent in its resonances.

7.0 IN CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I've sought to show that poetic inquiry is an approach to life and art that can also be successfully deployed as an exciting mode of literary education within the university context. I've endeavored to explain the function of the notion of the soul as a poetic theory which can be useful as both a starting ground for the practice of poetic inquiry, and also as a poetically explanatory hypothesis for the mystery of why poetic inquiry can produce the astounding and extra-rational results that it sometimes does—the transmutation of life into truth, the odd and happy sensation that one mind wrote and the same mind reads. My exploration of the elements of poetic inquiry as they are discussed in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and other profound poetic thinkers such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Jane Hirshfield shows that poetic inquiry is nothing new, but it *is* something which has not previously been concisely articulated and brought to bear within a classroom as I have here presented it.

In my foregoing discussions of selected writings from my students in my Reading the Soul of Poetry class, I've highlighted the ways in which this writing either succeeds as the fruit of a poetic inquiry or productively practices the movements of poetic inquiry in a way that paves the ground for future success in the endeavor. I intend these discussions to demonstrate that it is indeed possible to guide students to very sophisticated accomplishments in the practice of contemplatively seeking truth and then creatively expressing the truths they discover in a manner that generates new thought and sets the faculties of the mind into swing. This possibility can be

fulfilled by the use of prompts, readings, and experiments of the kind that I deployed in the course—all of which I hope stir the creativity of readers of this dissertation and inspire them to generate other wonderful prompts, readings, and experiments of their own which can be used in the service of guiding the practice of poetic inquiry.

I've also shown that the work of poetic inquiry can be deeply positively transforming and liberating for students, even as they simply begin to experiment with its practice. This positive transformation and liberation experience is evident to a high degree not only in the earnest testament of healing and illumination given by Aradhana Purker in her Poetry Gift Exchange Letter and in the sensitive discoveries Molly Burkett gestures to in her lyric essay, but also in the fascinating and volatile work of Tunmise Layiwola and Hannah Swysgood, whose writing performs intense confrontations and vivid unions with poetry and the poetic that result in dramatic alterations in those writers' self-reported experience of the world and of themselves. Perhaps less obviously but just as importantly, we can also see poetic inquiry at work as a positively transforming process in the evolution of Daniel Radin's writing from dry prosiness to exuberant punning, in Sean Brodarick's imaginative contextualization of his difficult and disciplined life within the myth-history of heroic warfare, and in Leah Nesmith's awkward but tender attempts at metaphor as a means of imagining herself and her relationships.

7.1 POETIC INQUIRY: THE REINVENTION OF THE WORLD

As I previously discussed, on the first day of class in Reading the Soul of Poetry I led students through a guided visualization exercise titled "Dwell in Possibility" in which we envisioned the best possible semester with the most positive consequences for our lives. After the visualization,

we wrote “reflections” as if we were our post-course December selves. On the actual last day of class I handed these writings back to the students and asked them to write about what among their hopes had or hadn’t been realized, and what they had indeed learned this semester. Here, I present the fruits of both exercises as written by Daniel Radin, which I feel are representative of the overall tone of these past-and-future reflections from the class.

On the first day of class, Radin wrote:

The first day resonates clearly, back when poetry was an intangible art form, back when this class intimidated me more than the monster that is business calculus. All worries are now gone. The days went by, each quicker and more valuable than the next. I learned that not only am I an equal poet to my peers, but I’ve learned from their originality and become a master of my own expression. My fear of my imagination and of the worth of my soulful quality is nonexistent. Each assignment has given me a new confidence in my ability as a writer, a student, a peer, a teacher, and a soul. I gained a new outlook on the way I view poetry, the poetic community, and the world. I’ve become comfortable enough with myself to share myself with this class, and by extension, the universe. I’ve gained the necessary skills to improve not only the lyrics in my songs, but the tune itself. The greats like Emerson and Whitman taught in the class room here in 151, and I was here to gain their insight. And thinking back to that first day, I wonder why I was so nervous to enter the class, and I’m sorry to see it come to a wonderful end.

On the last day of class, after he had read again for the first time in three months what he had previously written for the “Dwell in Possibility” exercise on the first day of the semester, Daniel Radin wrote:

My jaw dropped when I read the paper I wrote on the first day of class. Everything I had expressed desire for in the class had come true in some form, whether consciously or not. I remember the intimidation that I felt on that first day, how I wasn't sure my creativity was as good as that of the others. The only thing that really changed was my confidence.

It wasn't so much of the way I thought about things that changed, but rather the way I saw, experienced, and subsequently described them. My work fell into an honest spotlight. I came to understand it was OK to say exactly how you feel about something, and poetry is just art at its core. We, as a class, have learned to confide in each other through our work, and expose flashes of our innermost souls.

Like anything else in life, the writing developed most enthusiastically after the exorcism of fear. It was really just fear holding us from telling the story as it really was, or seeing things in their naked form. From there, we as artists became the medium for creativity.

The experimental nature of the class, while seeming absolutely ludicrous at times, now (for the first time) seems like the best decision in terms of the class. Loose constraints allowed for infinite expansion of the mind. While directions may have been unclear at a few points, the end result was an unconditional success because there was no wrong interpretation.

Interpretation is a key part of poetry. It's the lens you see the world in, and without it, there would be so much less room for variation and originality (which is what we should always strive for). As artists, our goal, subconsciously, is to

convince others of our uniqueness. In being unique, we may be scoffed at, ridiculed, or isolated. That's why originality both imprisons and frees us; when we're put down by critics, there is consolation in authenticity.

We shouldn't fear the unknown. We shouldn't fear criticism or potential shame. Overcoming fear is the most valuable obstacle one can overcome, and it's one of the most difficult.

This class provided that extra push. It pushed boundaries and imaginations. It ignited internal flames, and told our engines "we can!" as we chugged up the hill. If things get tough, coming out bruised and victorious becomes that much more rewarding.

We can also learn from failure. Not achieving a goal leads to defeat and despair. Yet from the ashes, persistence rebirths us into stronger beings. More honest artists. More soulful people.

Life is what you make it. You'll never win the lottery unless you play, and the fear of failure is the most pitiful excuse you can offer. As artist, there is always an unexplored dimension, and an evolution to open another blind eye.

When I wrote my first page for this class, I was terrified of failure. But now I've taken the first step to overcome it. I know it's not scary. And there are more boundaries to expand from here. I plan on creating new ones, and ascending that many more.

It's funny how you can sometimes confide your innermost fears to a room full of strangers you twistedly think of as friends. We don't know each other outside of class. Yet our shared experiences and thirst for improvement give us a

common bond. We still don't know each other as people. And yet we know the deepest caverns of each other.

Life is a learning process. Class is just a microcosm of this. Going through each with other people is a comfort. We expose our flaws and secrets with those who do the same. By building off one another's thoughts, we reinvent ourselves, and reinvent the class. We reinvent the world.

And I'm really sorry to see it come to a close.

I find Radin's reflection that "It wasn't so much of the way I thought about things that changed [through the course of the semester], but rather the way I saw, experienced, and subsequently described them" to be very significant. It suggests to me that in the course of the semester Radin learned to practice poetic inquiry—shifting into Possibility or poetic perception, experiencing reality from that perception, and "subsequently describ[ing]" what he saw there using the power of poetic strategies. This suggestion is of course supported by my own familiarity with Radin's writing earlier and then later in the term.

I'm also intrigued by Radin's observation that

We shouldn't fear the unknown. We shouldn't fear criticism or potential shame. Overcoming fear is the most valuable obstacle one can overcome, and it's one of the most difficult.

This class provided that extra push. It pushed boundaries and imaginations. It ignited internal flames, and told our engines "we can!" as we chugged up the hill."

I find this observation about fear and the way Reading the Soul of Poetry pushed Radin to overcome his fear to be especially interesting because in a passage from *The Courage to Teach*

which I cited early in this dissertation, the educational theorist Parker Palmer cites fear as a signature facet of the objectivist mode of knowing and educating:

The mode of knowing that dominates education creates disconnections between teachers, their subjects, and their students because it is rooted in fear. This mode, called *objectivism*, portrays truth as something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the thing we want to know. (51)

Radin's report that Reading the Soul of Poetry pushed him to overcome to some degree his fear of the unknown, his fear of criticism and shame, and instead "to confide" and to "expose flashes of ... innermost soul[s]" with his classmates to me is one strong indication that poetic inquiry as I taught it in Reading the Soul of Poetry and as I presented it here is indeed a mode of knowing and of educating which is distinctly different and in some ways superior to the objectivist paradigm which currently dominates our institutions of higher learning. As Radin tells it, the class created warm and lively connections between himself, his classmates, and poetry—rather than creating the disconnections and alienation which Parker notes as endemic to objectivist paradigms.

I'm delighted that the guidance which I was fortunate to be able to provide to Radin in overcoming his initial fears and hesitations in the practice of poetic inquiry led him to an exhilarating sense that "there are more boundaries to expand from here." As Radin describes it, beginning the path of poetic inquiry sounds much like the start of the hero's journey which Joseph Campbell famously described in *Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Radin writes "I plan on creating new ones [boundaries to expand], and ascending that many more." "Ascending" is certainly a heroic word if there ever was one. I've recently been reading Campbell's work and I

must say I think Radin is on to something here about the nature of poetic inquiry: the first movement of poetic inquiry consists in a willingness to enter the liminal state of Possibility or not-knowing in order to seek for truth, and this indeed mirrors the hero's initial venture from the comfort of a safe home into the bewildering magic world of tribulations (Campbell 28). The second movement of poetic inquiry involves the wherewithal to generate creative expressions of truths discovered in Possibility which can then benefit others, and this indeed mirrors the hero's struggle to return home to the ordinary world after having won from the magic one an elixir that can restore life to the people (Campbell 29).

Like Radin, I was also very sad to see *Reading the Soul of Poetry* end. But my sadness was tempered by a renewed sense that the grand things that Shelley and Emerson had to say about the power of poetic inquiry really are true. As Radin so well put it, when we practice it "We reinvent the world."

Appendix A

THE SYLLABUS FOR READING THE SOUL OF POETRY FALL 2012

READING POETRY SYLLABUS

Course: Reading Poetry 27706 - L0315
Classroom: CL 151
Meetings: Monday and Wednesday 4:30 - 5:45
Teacher: Carolyn Elliott
Contact: sweetsongofjoy@gmail.com
Office: CL 617C
Mailbox: CL 501
Office Hours: Tuesday 3:00-5:00
Text: The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer to Eliot
ed. Harold Bloom. New York: HarperCollins, 2004.

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone, a spirit of unity, that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. -- Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria

The soul is a dark forest. -- D.H. Lawrence, American Literature

The best use of literature bends not toward the narrow and the absolute but to the extravagant and the possible. -- poet Mary Oliver in her introduction to The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson

Course Description: Reading the Soul of Poetry

This is an experimental, exploratory course designed to teach, implement, and reflectively question a soul-centered mode of reading and writing both poetry and responses to poetry. Though continuously given popular approval in many arenas, soul-centered engagement with poetry and poetics has not previously enjoyed widespread acceptance within the modern secular research university; however, this mode of engagement has a great intellectual heritage stretching (at least) from Plato's Socrates in Ancient Greece to Ralph Waldo Emerson in nineteenth-century New England.

In this course we will examine important texts in the history of poetics which theorize and / or perform the relationship of poetry to the soul. We will practice intensive (rather than extensive) reading of poetry, a mode of reading traditionally suggested as a means of expanding the soul's experience of poetry. We will engage in classroom exercises and experiments designed to create an atmosphere conducive to soulful response, expression, and evolution. We will expand our ability to write sensitively and articulately by practicing thinking-*with* poetry.

This course has a distinctly Transcendentalist inspiration in all of its elements. In keeping with this inspiration, the overall tone of our activities will be one of festive optimism intended to facilitate an elevated consciousness in our engagement with poetry and with each other. We will attend to and experiment with the power that Emerson claimed great poetry possesses: the power to alter and expand our awareness for the better, to liberate our thought and unite us to a larger conception of ourselves as interconnected beings.

Key questions of this course are: What is the soul? What is poetry? What is

poesis? Why would we want to think of ourselves as "souls"--or why not? What is the relationship of the soul to the imagination? What do we value in poetry? Can poetry harm the soul (as Plato's Socrates claimed)? How do we recognize something as "soulful" rather than as merely intellectual or emotional? How can we participate in intellectual community in a way that increases our capacity to experience life and one another? Do poems have souls? What happens when we think of our selves / souls as poems? What manners, attitudes and practices best foster positively transforming encounters with poems and with human beings?

The course includes weekly written assignments, class experiments and presentations, weekly required reading assignments (usually 20-40 pages of dense prose), required memorization and recitation of poetry, and essay assignments.

Teacher Description: Carolyn Elliott (i.e., me)

My pedagogy (i.e., manner and philosophy of teaching and learning) is directly inspired by the lives and writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. All of these persons sought to inspire, uplift, and provoke those they taught. All of them conceptualized (explicitly or implicitly) their life's work as part of a flow of gifts. Similarly, I see teaching as an opportunity for gift-giving and gift-receiving. Inspiration, upliftment, and provocation are the primary gifts which I wish to convey to my students; they are also the gifts to which I am most open to receiving. The transmission of specific skills and bodies of knowledge concerning the reading and writing of poetry and poetics are secondary gifts that I seek to bestow and accept; they are valuable to the degree that they enhance and support the primary gifts.

In keeping with this Transcendentalist pedagogical tradition, I theorize teaching and learning as events which happen by means of and which possess transformative consequences for the souls of all involved. I aim to teach with my whole soul.

General Course Goals

The following points represent over-all goals of this course. You will be graded based upon my holistic assessment of your fulfillment of these goals via your portfolio and class participation.

1. Engage in reading and writing as creative forms of poetic inquiry.

Here you'll be invited to use reading and writing as means to explore and generate new thought. Through writing that thinks-*with* poetry, you'll examine your own current modes of relating to reality, and you'll be expected to consciously expand and revise those modes in writing.

2. Contribute meaningfully and positively to class experiments.

Since this is a course which explores and deploys a Transcendentalist pedagogy (one that hypothesizes that the soul is what is changed in all situations of learning and most profoundly in poetic learning), we will be engaging in playful experiments designed to foreground the possibility of experiencing ourselves and others as interconnected souls, rather than as simply minds or bodies. These experiments are a little out of the ordinary in terms of conventional college classroom activities. *If you commit to taking this course, you will be expected to loosen up and participate fully.* You'll never be asked to accept the premises of the experiments as truths, but you *will* need to accept the premises of the experiments as a starting grounds for active exploration, and to engage in the experiments themselves with an attitude of open-mindedness and willingness.

3. Address challenging questions about the nature of poetry and life.

This course assumes that the work of reading poetry is not a matter of discerning iambs from anapests or even getting at the meaning of poems, but rather in allowing ourselves to engage in the energy of *poiesis* (making). Part of what is made as we read poetry is our idea about what poetry is and who we are in relation to it. You'll be invited to reflect on these matters and to articulate your own poetics, or theory of poetry.

4. Create literary community inside and outside the classroom

Via our shared projects (the Commonplace Book, the Read-Arounds), visits to poetry-related events and contributions to various contests and journals, we will generate a sense of ourselves as relevant voices in ongoing, larger conversations about poetry and poetic experience.

General Course Policies

Attendance

Since your writing and responses to the reading are central to class discussions and experiments, attendance is mandatory. Come to class on time, prepared to take part in conversation about the materials under study. You are allowed **three** absences during the term for whatever reason, though it is strongly recommended that you strive for perfect attendance. *If you do miss a class, you must arrange for your assignment that day to be submitted on time, either via email or by placing it in my mailbox in CL-501. Four absences without a documented excuse (such as a doctor's note) will result in a full one-grade penalty to your final grade; more than four absences can be grounds for failure.* Students in this situation may want to consider withdrawing from the course and taking it again under better circumstances.

Writing Assignments

There will be some form of writing every week, and all writing assignments must be completed in order for you to pass the course. Writing assignments must also be submitted on time. *If you submit an essay late (without a documented excuse), your final grade for the semester will drop by one step (C+ turns to C, for example). More than two late submissions of any other assignment (Read-Around, Commonplace Book, exercises, etc.) drops your final grade by one step, and every late submission thereafter drops it another step.* Finally, any late assignment that isn't submitted by the following class will not receive my written commentary.

Grading

Your grade will be determined by a review of your writing and overall course participation twice during the course of the semester-- once at midterm and once during final exam week. In other words, rather than grading each and every paper individually, I'll write comments intended to help you revise your essays before I grade them. In-class writing, Commonplace Book entries, and Read Around submissions will generally not receive individual response, but your responses to these assignments may be discussed by the class.

At midterm, I'll schedule a conference with you to discuss your progress and give you a provisional grade. Your provisional mid-term grade will be determined in response to your mid-term portfolio. You should feel free to visit me during my office hours to discuss your work at any point during the semester. A final grade will be determined in response to your final portfolio, which is due on December 13th at noon. Your portfolio will include all your work for the term and will be graded according to the following scale:

Essays	70%
All other writing	30%

I may also choose to raise your final grade by a step (e.g, B to B+) in order to recognize

exemplary participation in class discussion, experiments, and field trips.

Portfolios

Your mid-term and final portfolios should contain copies of all of your writing for the class to that date, including essays, Read-Around materials, and Commonplace Book contributions.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism will not be tolerated. It is important that you *cite your sources, even when you are only paraphrasing*. You do not avoid plagiarism by changing a few words or lines in a quotation and then pretending that it's yours. All instances of plagiarism will result in an automatic "F" on the assignment, a full revision without credit, and a report to the Dean. (For more information on plagiarism, see the code of student conduct at <http://www.as.pitt.edu/facult/policy/integrity.html>).

Course Website

This course uses a Google groups site and not a Blackboard site. More info to come.

Additional Assistance

The Writing Center

Located in M2 Thaw Hall, the Writing Center is an excellent resource for working on your writing with an experienced consultant. Although you should not expect consultants to correct your papers for you, they can assist you in learning to organize, edit, and revise your essays. Consultants can work with you on a one-time basis, or they can work with you throughout the term. Their services are free, but you should call ahead (412-624-6556) or make an appointment online at www.english.pitt.edu/writingcenter.

Disability Resources and Other Services

Pitt offers a number of services to help students who are struggling either academically or personally..

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both your instructor and Disability Resources and Services, 216 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890 or (412) 383-7355(TTY), as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Pitt also offers free counseling at the Counseling Center, located in 334 William Pitt Union (412-648-7930), for students who are experiencing personal or emotional difficulties.

Specific Goals of Course Elements

The Goal of Our Essay Writing Assignments

The essay writing assignments in this course are designed to enable you, by December, to have produced a piece of writing which which can be eligible for publication in an undergraduate literary journal (local examples: *Collision*, *The Three Rivers Review*). As part of our final project in this class, we will prepare and submit our pieces for publication. Publication in journals is a means of participating and having influence in a larger literary community. Through the essay assignments, we will learn to tailor our writing so that it may be legible to this larger community.

The Goal of Our Other Writing Assignments

The other writing assignments in this course are designed to facilitate your reflection on issues raised by our assigned reading, our work with poetry, our class exercises, and your life. While the essay writing assignments help you to be heard by the larger world (via literary journals), the other writing assignments allow you to be heard by your immediate community (this class). What you choose to share with us via these assignments is a crucial part of everyone's experience, every bit as important as the essays and poetry by well-known authors which we will read. You are also our teacher.

The Goal of Our Required Field Trips

This term we will have two required field trips: 1) The Tuesday Night Open-Mic at the Shadow Lounge and 2) The Pittsburgh Contemporary Writers Series feature of the poet C.D. Wright at the Frick Fine Arts Auditorium. Like our graded writing assignments, these field trips aim to engage us in the larger literary community.

The Goal of Our Class Experiments

Our class experiments (initial experiments include: coming to class dressed as your Possible Self, bringing a small gift to exchange with a classmate which to you symbolizes Poetry, participating in a poetic picnic) aim to engender an imaginative, playful atmosphere in our class community, thus facilitating deep engagement with poetry and with one another. These experiments are designed to take us outside the mundane consciousness of separation and calculation and into a soulful consciousness of expansive unity, possibility, and giving.

Ongoing Shared Course Projects

Read-Arounds

Our firsthand, subjective (non)experiences of "soul" and "poetry" via our class experiments and our intensive reading of poems are a significant body of knowledge in this course. In order to make these bodies of knowledge available for community consideration and in order to practice experiencing our writing as a gift freely offered and received, we will have a weekly "Read-Around" on Wednesdays in which we share "personal" (i.e., not necessarily academic, although it could be) material (up to two pages in length): this material can have any generic form: fictional or autobiographical story, drama, poetry, literary criticism, blog post-- or anything else.

During the Read-Arounds, you will never receive criticism of your writing style from me or the class. Read-Arounds are not writing workshops, they are simply chances to share writing and be heard and appreciated. Most weeks we will simply hear each person read their contribution. On some occasions, we may have assignments or discussions which involve engaging directly with Read-Around materials as resources for further thought.

Every Monday I will provide a prompt for the Wednesday Read-Around. The material you submit should pertain to the prompt.

Everyone is required to email me their Read-Around pieces each week on Tuesday night. Due to the size of the class and time constraints, there are some weeks that not everyone may be able to share with the class during the Read-Around, but best efforts will be made to accommodate everyone being heard. **I reserve the right to disallow a piece to be shared during the read-around if I feel that its sharing would be disruptive to collegiality and good will in our class community.**

The Commonplace Book

A "commonplace book" is a blank book (or, in our cases, Google groups web page) wherein one records "commonplaces" or quotations from one's reading that one would like to remember for future consideration along with notes about those quotations. We will be generating a communal commonplace book. A common commonplace book, if you will! In our communal Commonplace Book, we will give notes not only to our own chosen quotations but also to those submitted by others. Our Commonplace Book will record our communal experience of engagement with poetry and poetics in this course. Like the Read-Around materials, it may form the basis for some of our assignments.

Every Wednesday I will give the class an assignment for that week's Commonplace Book

contribution.

Everyone is required to complete their weekly Commonplace Book contribution by Sunday night and to sign it with their full name.

Weekly Written Assignments

Every Sunday by 10 pm:

On Google Groups, make the assigned contribution to the Commonplace Book. Be sure to "sign" this contribution with your full name.

Every Tuesday by 10 pm:

Email to me a "personal" (i.e., not academic) piece of writing of any genre, one to two double-spaced pages in length, pertaining to the given prompt.

Reading

The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer to Eliot, ed. Harold Bloom.
New York: Harper Collins, 2004.

Photocopied essays (usually from 20 to 40 pages in length).

Photocopied poetry.

The Best Poems of the English Language is available at the University Book Center.

{I may ask you to purchase an additional text later in the term }

Grades

However well you've done in high school, bear in mind that this course will set higher standards for writing than you've probably experienced before. It's not uncommon for papers that might have earned an "A" in high school to be considered no better than a "C" in college. Here's how the University of Pittsburgh defines each grade level:

A = Superior Attainment
B = Meritorious Attainment
C = Adequate Attainment
D = Minimal Attainment
F = Failure

Note that "meritorious" means commendable or praiseworthy: a "B," in other words, reflects a well-written paper, not an average result. Part of our work in this course will be to locate pieces of writing that deserve praise and to identify the reasons why.

Email

Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. This e-mail address may be used by the University for official communication with students. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. Failure to read and react to University communications in a timely manner does not absolve the student from knowing and complying with the content of the communications. The University provides an e-mail forwarding service that allows students to read their e-mail via other service providers (e.g., Hotmail, AOL, Yahoo). Students that choose to forward their e-mail from their pitt.edu address to another address do so at their own risk. If e-mail is lost as a result of forwarding, it does not absolve the student from responding to official communications sent to their University e-mail address. To forward e-mail sent to your University account, go to <http://accounts.pitt.edu>, log into your account, click on Edit Forwarding Addresses, and follow the instructions on the page. Be sure to log out of your account when you have finished. (For the full E-mail Communication Policy, go to www.bc.pitt.edu/policies/policy/09/09-10-01.html.)

Essays

We will write four essays for this class. An essay will be due every four weeks, with the first essay due on Monday, September 20. The essays will vary in length from 5 to 10 pages, depending on the assignment. On weeks that essays are due, we will not have a separate Commonplace Book contribution assignment or Read-Around prompt. We will use excerpts from our essays for the Commonplace Book contribution and for the Read-Around on Wednesday. You will receive the assignment for each essay one week before the essay is due. My comments on your essays will be returned to you one week after I have collected them.

How to Format Your Essays

1. Your essays should be double-spaced in a 12-point font with standard one-inch margins.
2. Your essays should have a **unique title**-- something that reflects what the essay says or does. You should *not* use titles like "Essay 1."
3. The title should be placed on the top line of the first page. No title sheet is necessary. The title should *not* be underlined or placed in quotation marks.
4. Skip two lines after the title and begin your essay. Do *not* skip additional lines between paragraphs. Just go to the next line and use the tab key to indent.
5. Your essay should include *page numbers* in the upper right-hand corner.
6. Your essay should be *carefully proofread* for errors in wording, punctuation, and spelling. *If I encounter an excessive number of errors, you'll be required to make corrections before you receive credit for the assignment.* Errors of this kind will also adversely affect your grade. (Note: I will not correct errors for you, as doing so is your responsibility. But I will help the class learn to identify errors and address them).

READING POETRY IMPORTANT DATES

Monday	9/6	NO CLASS -- Labor Day
Monday	9/13	First Reciting of Memorized Passage
Wednesday	9/15	Second Reciting of Memorized Passage
Monday	9/20	Essay 1 Due
Tuesday	9/21	Shadow Lounge Open Mic Field Trip
Wednesday	10/6	Submissions due to Marlee and James Myer Award
Monday	10/11	NO CLASS-- Fall Break
Monday	10/18	Essay 2 and Mid-Term Portfolio Due
Thursday	11/4	Poet C.D. Wright at Frick Fine Arts Field Trip
Monday	11/15	Essay 3 Due
Wednesday	11/24	NO CLASS -- Thanksgiving Break
Monday	12/13	Essay 4 and Final Portfolio Due

Appendix B

THE INTELLECTUAL JOURNEY TOWARDS *POETIC INQUIRY*

My journey towards writing *Poetic Inquiry* began in the literary criticism stacks of the Carnegie Library when I was in high school. Throughout my childhood and young adolescence I had had experiences with reading and writing the type of writing that we broadly call “literature” (poetry, novels, stories, plays) that had deeply changed my consciousness and I wanted to find confirmation and theoretical explanation of that experience. I found how-to books (Alain de Botton’s charming *How Proust Can Change Your Life*) and personal reflections (among the best: Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, Simone de Beauvoir’s autobiography, Colette’s memoirs) but no cogent theory that illuminated what happened to me in my reading and writing life.

Because I failed to find it in the library stacks, I assumed that the cogent theory was well-known by scholars and contemporary writers and was waiting for me in the literature and creative writing classes of universities. I went for a B.A. in English and Creative Writing at Carnegie Mellon. In an introduction to literary criticism class I read Freud, Jung, Foucault, Derrida for the first time. The closest thing I found to a theoretical explanation for my intense experience in literature was Derrida’s essay, “Plato’s *Pharmakon*,” wherein Derrida elaborates on Plato’s notion that the written word can act as a drug that can either heal or hurt its reader.

This to me was an important clue. For the most part, I felt perplexed by the majority of literary criticism and scholarship that I encountered as an undergraduate because it seemed to treat literature not as a volatile, psychoactive substance capable of engendering dramatic change in those who read it, but rather as something to be historically contextualized or politically analyzed. I could see how many of these approaches were immensely valuable and fascinating, and my curiosity about them and enjoyment of them sustained me through all my coursework, but they did not speak to my most intimate experience of literature. My creative writing classes (apart from wonderful courses in essay-writing taught by Hilary Masters and Jane McCafferty,

which taught me the power of the essay as a process of engaged exploration) were equally perplexing. They taught poetry-writing and story-writing as matters of craft, imitation, self-expression and entertainment—all viable modes, but not ones that I intuitively experienced as deeply essential.

In a senior seminar I read Nietzsche's "The Use and Abuse of History for Life." In that essay, Nietzsche argued that the most important thing about history is that it can be used to inspire and invigorate aware action in the present moment and lamented modes of study that approached history as a hobby-house of antiques, a series of triumphant monuments or a record to be criticized for its failures through the eyes of present values and virtues. It seemed to me that what Nietzsche argued was similarly true of literature—that the study of literature should properly be geared towards the inspiration and expansion of the mind that reads in the present, rather than directed to drawing up taxonomies, tributes and criticisms. It's true that there are already existing modes of reading within literary scholarship that accomplish this present-moment expansion in various ways. I particularly admire queer theory for its delightfully subversive and re-contextualizing moves. But I felt that more could be done to make the study of literature a practice that nurtures the present.

I applied to graduate school in literary studies believing that I would find teachers and fellow students who understood what I was talking about when I spoke of literature's transformative, uplifting properties.

There, a few helpful beacons appeared. In my first semester of graduate school I read Plato's *Republic*. Plato's Socrates passionate dismissal of poets from the Republic on the grounds that poetry had dangerous potentials again affirmed for me that I wasn't crazy—Plato also thought poetry was potent stuff, *pharmakon*. I read more of Nietzsche—a specific turning

point for me was Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ* wherein he argues that St. Paul's version of Christianity and the founding of the wealth-hoarding and violence-promoting Church was a means of inoculating society against the radically transformative life and words of Jesus Christ by actually pretending to defend and study them. This struck a deep chord in me, and I felt, once again, that Nietzsche had made an important observation. It then occurred to me that institutional literary scholarship at many times does the same thing for poetry (understood as "literature") that St. Paul did for Jesus: it inoculates society against the radically transformative potentials of poetry by defending and studying it in terms that make it *less*, rather than *more* available as an agent of change.. I realized that the analytical and reifying moves of some kinds of institutional literary studies served to neuter poetry of its power in our culture far better than Socrates' expulsion of poetry from the Republic ever could.

I began to see ways in which some works of "literary study" can act as rejections of the radical way of knowing and discovering that poetry embodies. Political and historical analyses (Freudian, Feminist, Marxist, Structuralism and Post-Structuralism, historicisms of all kinds) can be provocative and worthwhile means of opening up thought about poetry, but they can also at times be means by which folks defend themselves against the potentially dangerous wiles of poetry using the power of logical analysis.

The first book of thought about literature that struck me as resolutely doing something other than defending-against poetry's power was Heidegger's collection of essays *Poetry, Language, Thought*. There, Heidegger approaches poetry directly and fearlessly as itself a valuable terrain that can open up new knowledge. He doesn't move to analyze poetry through his philosophy, but rather humbly adjusts his philosophy to the perceptions illuminated by poetry. He sensitively reads Rilke and Holderlin as starting-points for fresh thought about the

nature of phenomenal experience rather than as objects to be pinned down and dissected.

Heidegger here stresses that we must “poetically inquire....” and it was here that I first began to consider that necessity myself.

At the same time that I was reading Nietzsche and Heidegger, I was also reading a large amount of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is himself a wily poet: he wrote under so many fictional names and in so many fantastically different voices and perspectives that it’s impossible to get a firm hold on him. But I was powerfully struck by his insight in *Fear and Trembling* and in many of his various theological essays that the Word of God (specifically, the life and being of Jesus Christ) is a great offense to all of our ordinary modes of thinking and valuing. Kierkegaard argued that real faith and therefore real transformation only occur when an intense paradox (like Jesus, understood as both God and Man, infinite and finite) could be faced and accepted unflinchingly, *without taking offense* and without making any attempt to soften the scorching impossibility of the paradox. Like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard launched scathing criticism at conventional Christianity for softening, avoiding, and defending-against the radical offense of Jesus’ life and teaching.

It occurred to me that poetry at its best is also an offensive paradox: it’s simply language, like the sort we use everyday, but it’s language that’s not-quite-explicitly endowed with a tremendous transformative power that many poets (though very few literary scholars) freely attribute to the divine. In this sense, like Jesus, it’s both finite and infinite. Ordinary and extraordinary. Mortal and immortal. But how can that be? Well, it can’t. It’s a terrible paradox, and it’s offensive.

Kierkegaard gave me a better understanding of the nature of poetry. I could see that just as Kierkegaard fearlessly confronted the paradox of Jesus, and used that confrontation to propel

his awareness into a deeper perspective (one that he called *true subjectivity*) so Heidegger had done the same with the paradox of poetry. Both Kierkegaard and Heidegger had declined to take offense at something profoundly offensive and distasteful to most people. Jesus and poetry.

As an aside, I don't think it's any coincidence that both Jesus and poetry are often either sentimentalized and made ridiculous or else held up as impossible-to-attain ideals that are irrelevant to real life. The ferocity and continuity of such sentimentalizing and idealizing belie resistance and fear to the possibility of change that both Jesus and poetry present.

Not long after I read Kierkegaard, I found an amazing book by Hazard Adams, *The Offenses of Poetry*, which made this connection all the more clear to me. Adams doesn't base his thought about poetry directly upon Kierkegaard, but he does base it on the work of a theologian who studied Kierkegaard. In the *Offenses of Poetry*, Adams elaborated the same thing I had observed: that the history of poetry study and discussion is for the most part a long tradition of either abjectly apologizing and explaining away poetry's offenses or defending-against it. He offers a wonderful discussion of each of poetry's offenses (story, gesture, drama, trope) which I've referred to in *Poetic Inquiry* with the more neutral term "poetic strategies." Adams explains what exactly is so offensive about each of these strategies to conventional sensibilities regarding the proprieties of language and sense-making. He also helpfully pointed towards Blake and Yeats as examples of poets who thought deeply and positively about the offensive potentials of poetry, and about poetry as a profoundly important alternative mode of being and thinking.

I decided to venture further into Heidegger's thought. I read the masterpiece of his first period, *Being and Time*. The most important insight I gleaned from *Being and Time* was that Heidegger defined the basic mode of human beingness as anxiety or care, *Sorge*. I notice that this is certainly true of the daily experience of myself and most humans I know—we're

perpetually consumed with worry about our future well-being, and with working to make provisions for that future well-being. It occurred to me that this condition of anxiety is exactly what Jesus spoke against in the Sermon on the Mount, when he suggested to his followers that they live like lilies of the field and birds of the air, without care for the future and with total absorption in the present (a theme that Kierkegaard wrote on extensively).

I then read Heidegger's late essay *On Technology* where I discovered that Heidegger contrasts a mode of being and thinking that he terms *the Enframing* with *poiesis* or *dwelling poetically*. Put simply *the Enframing* is an attitude that seeks to exploit nature and human beings. It stockpiles resources and it motivates technological advancement. It's interested in extracting power, stockpiling it and hoarding it. It's the dominant mode of our present age. *Poiesis* or *dwelling poetically*, conversely, is the attitude that seeks creative harmony with life-as-it-is rather than domination and power-over it. It struck me that *dwelling poetically* closely resembles living like a lily of the field.

Looking for more insight into Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Derrida I found the philosopher-theologian John Caputo's important book *The Weakness of God*. In *The Weakness of God* Caputo explores the notion of divinity as a "weak force" or a faculty of interpretation rather than as a "strong force" which intervenes directly like a cartoon hand into natural and human life. Caputo's arguments reinforced my understanding of poetic dwelling and interpretation as dimensions of an important and ever-accessible-yet-frequently-reviled mode of consciousness that Jesus liked to call *the Kingdom of Heaven*.

In my third year of graduate school I met a turning point when I encountered Emerson's writing. In Emerson's essay "The American Scholar" I found for the first time a full endorsement of the attitude toward literature and the world that I personally found most helpful:

literature for the use of life and inspiration. I later discovered that Nietzsche had been deeply influenced by Emerson, and things began to make more sense. In Emerson's "The Poet" I found a discussion of poetic perception and thought that to me fully resonated with Heidegger's explorations of the same topics. It shocked me that Emerson's ideas about literature and poetry were not taken seriously by academic literary studies.

I read Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature* which illuminated for me the fact that academic literary studies, and indeed, all present university study, was based upon the materialist scientific mode of the German 19th-century university. It became clear to me how the model of materialist science, with its full rejection of classical, transcendental and romantic insights into poetry and life had strongly influenced the American study of literature (and indeed, every humanistic study—including psychology, religion, anthropology, sociology, history and philosophy) towards scientific aspiration. I recalled Nietzsche's discussion in *On the Genealogy of Morals* about how both materialist science and fundamentalist religion share an identical hunger for unimpeachable truth devoid of ambiguity and uncertainty that can shut down creative thought. It's true that in the later half of the twentieth century this scientific influence began to wear down and be pushed against by many important post-modern thinkers, but I feel we still need further thought that moves humanistic study away from scientific paradigms of objective truth that don't fit.

I read Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature*, which importantly seeks to directly account for the strange power of poetic language and confirmed my thoughts about the dramatic significance of that power. Attridge's book, in my estimation is a bit too timid. Still, it draws heavily upon Owen Barfield's *Poetic Diction*, which did similar work 50 years earlier and with more rigor. I discovered that Owen Barfield was a devotee of anthroposophy, the philosophy

of Rudolf Steiner. I read Rudolf Steiner's *Higher Worlds and How to Know Them*, which offers teachings about how to grow into higher consciousness through cultivating receptivity and intuition that closely resemble Emerson's advice in "The Poet." Of course, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Rudolf Steiner were all intimately inspired by Goethe. Goethe's *Faust*, which I read with great delight as a child and whose themes I continue to explore in my own poetry and fiction writing, strikes me as a prescient parable of how the exploration of mysteries of human life (like poetry and faith) are degraded by the Enframing attitude which seeks to control and exploit.

Concurrent to my following this thread of thought, I also read Thomas Moore's popularization of depth psychology, *The Care of the Soul*. Moore references Keats' discussion in his letters of this world as a "vale of soul-making" and of genius as a facility for "negative capability.... the ability to remain in uncertainty and doubt without any irritable reaching after fact or reason." Moore casually offers in his book that poetry is a soul-making process, a sentiment repeated by Edward Hirsch in *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*. I became intensely curious about the relationship of poetry to the soul. This curiosity was nurtured by my noticing that both Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, two great (and very different) American poets both spoke frequently and complexly about the soul, as did Emerson throughout his works but perhaps most clearly in his essay "The Over-Soul" which no doubt both Dickinson and Whitman read.

Investigating Emerson's thoughts about the nature of the soul led me to read Kant. In Kant's *Critique of Pure Judgment* I found his fascinating discussion about how we say that some art works and some people have "soul" while others don't, and his claim that genius produces works with "soul."

Because my primary interest lies in “poetry for the use of life” I decided to focus my efforts on translating what I’d discovered about poetry’s power into a format accessible to myself and my students. I found Heidegger’s suggestion that we must “inquire poetically...” in order to access poetry’s wisdom and energy to be a potent one, and therefore sought to understand how poetry as a mode of thought and discovery could be understood and taught. Hence, I developed the insights into poetic inquiry previously presented in this work.

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