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**INTERVIEW FOR *THE MODERN REVIEW***

**April 2006**

**TMR:** What was it like, your childhood in Brooklyn?

**RK:** The point of my childhood seemed to have been learning to thrive in isolation. Or to find richness and peculiarity and pleasure in that isolation. I'm not very interested in my childhood as a religion or a government – for me, my childhood is a kind of weird foreign country I spend an hour or two in, then hurry home to now, remembering some strange cheese I once tasted, or the sharp taste of sour rye.

I remember much. How much is enough to say?

Family tension was always between ocean and mountain. Father mountain Mother sea. She made do with lakes and rivers, though, and he with hills. Family = compromise. Is that why I never had children?

We lived on the south shore of Long Island, in Brooklyn. First near Sheepshead Bay (from my birth to my eighth year), then out in the Old Mill district, southwest of City Line, south of Cypress Hills, east of New Lots and Brownsville. The Old Mill (no building so called still existed) was close to water. A mile of paved streets with no houses at all on them led to the marshes that edged Jamaica Bay. This was the most important thing, the opening to the south, the chance of lucid emptiness. On the horizon the Belt Parkway carried cars east and west, and beyond that the sea.

So south of me the black mud, rushes, cattail grasses. Marshes. Birds. The sea at the end of sight, everything flat and the wind moving. But turn north from my house or west and I was in the city. North was the cemetery ridge, the western limb of the great terminal moraine left by the last glaciation. Our part was inhabited by the dead, Jewish cemeteries with their veiled urns, Christian cemeteries with peremptory stone angels vainly trying to rouse the sleepers. Over the ridge was Ridgewood, land of Germans. It was the first taste of Ordinary America.

Because we lived in Italy, all the speakers in the street were from Calabria or Sicily. The America I saw in the movies or heard about on the radio was somewhere else. Two or three blocks from us

began Brownsville, then the great Jewish *shtetl* in the middle of Brooklyn. My mother taught second and third graders in a public school on the boundary between the Italians and the Jews. My little sister asked: Are we Jewish or Italian? No other choices. What am I now?

My father loved the Country. This was sometimes called the mountains, but it was really the Delaware Valley in its northern reaches, Pennsylvania's Pike and Wayne Counties, New York's Sullivan County. The towns: Narrowsburgh. Cochection. Damascus. Callicoon.

Two weeks every year up there – but it defined summer for me, and away. And north.

All the other weeks I got to be alone. A city is such a beautiful place to be alone.

One thing I beg with all my heart that all parents would learn: leave the child alone. The child needs hours every day alone with his body, his sense of order, rhythm, movement, time.

Don't imprison the child in programmed activity. Organized play is not play at all. Leave the kid alone. Don't make him be present in every family moment. It's not television, you're not A Family. The child is a person. Leave the child to know his own time. There is nothing in the world more precious than time of your own.

My greatest blessing was hours every day alone; both parents worked, and the hours after release from the hated schoolroom were my time.

Walking the streets, looking at people, finding the libraries, reading, playing ball – the kind of solitude I needed, I think everyone needs to be able to process what they see and hear, and bring it into alignment with what they feel.

Walking around is a way of getting to know your own body. And what you're walking around in and through is language.

I was walking through the names of things.

My eyesight was poor in those days; I squinted fearfully, and only color made sense. Color and touch – what else do I trust even now?

Names. What I saw I wanted to name, to know the names of.

Things got realer for me when I knew their names.

I can remember some of those words that came to transform things

– names transform things into themselves. Oak-tag. Pine grove.

Hoarfrost. Snow.

**TMR:** When did this interest in words develop into poetry?

**RK:** Poetry led me a strange dance. Maybe it is a boyish thing – now that you ask me, it suddenly reminds me that my approach to poetry was like my (or most boys’) approach to girls; for years girls are alien and incomprehensible and boring, mostly boring, but boring in an annoying way (which should give a boy a hint that there’s more here than meets the eye – but boys seldom take hints).

Then something happens, and girls become the most interesting energies on the planet – yet of course the more profoundly you approach and revere them, the more they remain alien and incomprehensible: but those are profound qualities now, intensities of order that revise the boy’s own easy order, transform his scattered excitements into some single ardor.

It was like that with me with poetry. I couldn't stand it. Couldn't understand why people wrote or quoted it. Of course the poetry I saw was scant, usually attached to something else, like an epigraph to a Kipling story or some dreary quotation that held up the action in a book about something real. The books I read were history and science and geography and mountain climbers and China and religion and Antarctic exploration – and what they now call imaginative fiction, all I could get. I read everything I could find, but not poetry.

But poetry seemed trifling. Its formal strategies seemed mere insincerity. How could somebody mean something if they rhymed while saying it? How could feeling and knowledge fit into a meter? I was utterly ignorant of most poetry, knew nothing of its history, never thought about it except with a shiver of distaste.

Then something happened. What happened was that I opened one more time one of the few books there were in my family home, in a book of Best Loved Poems that of course, as a sedulous reader, I had often enough tried to read but appalled by its triviality let fall. This time I found Coleridge's Kublai Khan – and everything changed.

It was all there, the mystery, the earnestness of a man trying to say more than he knew, and certainly more than he knew how to say, the demon lover, the haunted landscape, Abyssinia, Cathay – all intensely charged in one inconclusive but magnificent shattered monument. Already I could feel the struggle Coleridge had with the meter – try scanning that poem when you’re eleven years old, with the rhymes caught too from dream. I felt the flaw of it, the struggle of it, the dream, the dense concentration of so many energies and so many learnings in that one poem, and was amazed.

So that’s what poetry could be. All the pleasures I had from reading, fantasizing, learning, music: all in this one strange thing, this alien, incomprehensible, but immensely sensual event.

So it wasn’t actually words themselves that led me there. But the haunted reality of words, the way things became more real for me, more passionate, when I could name them, that same reality hovered in poetry all of a sudden, the named unnamable. So poetry had to be temporary, provisional, expedient, flawed, hopeful, boastful, repentant, had to try to *win the truth of the words that come to mind*, and do so in one solitary engagement with as much music as your breath could hold.

To try and answer the question directly: I found slowly but certainly through poetry that poetry was the altar to which names are brought, where they give the most light, isolated as they are in the silence around each word in a poem. God, poems should be printed one word on a page, and then we'd really begin to understand them.

And then, in another way, all the spaces should fall away and we read all the syllables as one continuous breath of one single word. A poem is a single word, naming a sensual unknown.

**TMR:** That brings to mind your connection to Deep Image poetry. Can you tell us about the poetics of Deep Image, and about the individuals you found yourself associated with at that time in your life?

**RK:** There we were. It was a strange time: late 1950s, New York. So much energy in the air, so much openness. We could go anywhere. We did. Yet I felt, as someone working with the poem, that there were two pressures operating on us. And Libra that I am, though with a rebel Leo moon, I wanted to break open a way between the two viable 'schools' of the moment towards something that at the time I could only call true.



One 'school' was the official poetry of the time. Frost, say, and his epigones. Those are the ones that the US government (in the old USIA) used to send abroad to represent our country. (The horror of national representation still shocks me, that Mr Bush has a poet laureate, etc.) We called them the 'academics' because they were taught in schools and mostly taught in schools. Some of them I liked (early Lowell, middle Eberhart) well enough, as instances of power resident in text, but I didn't like what they were doing, I didn't like their concerns: family, personal history. The epigones all read like fragments of the Iliad rephrased by some timid rhapsode who couldn't quite scan and who had misplaced his war.

But what those poets did have, and that did mean a lot to me, was some connection with the great tradition of English poetry. I was in the painful situation of writing and struggling to establish a poetry, a poetics, that had never yet quite moved me the way Milton or Donne or Blake did and do.

[That was before the great, unnoticed revolution in American life: the explosion of the university. You can trace the recent history of American poetry by tracing the history of the universities: they opened up. At first absurdly rare (Bill Kinter at Lafayette in the

1950s –where most of us had our first ‘college readings’), little by little, the angels working, the colleges opened up to poets. Now the vast majority of poets, however eccentric, conventional, experimental, traditional, win their bread from the schools. It’s just like the Middle Ages again, where all writing and reading and uttered thinking took place in the monastery. And where we are today. and we’re the nuns and monks. Monastery + Marriage = Academia.

(I say poets, and I mean both written and oral poetry – because when it comes to poetry today, oral is a dialect of written, rather than the usual other-way-round in linguistics.)]

The other ‘school’ had life but I had not yet found its beauty. I saw dimly what Williams was up to, and I loved the lyric dailiness (that was later to overwhelm all our practice, from Oppenheimer to O’Hara...) but longed for the Other Thing, the glory, the high magic of Middleton and Marlowe --- some shadow of which crept into our time via strange [now alas] marginal magicians like Charles Williams or Dylan Thomas.

So I looked for some way to keep the lifeline with the old music while cutting free of its habits of diminished attention. I wanted to

see as vividly as haiku but cast a musical spell like a Druid, I wanted the world around me to be the world around me still, but charged with intensity and strangeness.

Thinking about it almost fifty years later, only now do I realize that I was in the position say Alban Berg was – my first and favorite modernist composer—caught between the intense emotional tonality of late romanticism, but seeing a starkly radical beauty possible, a cutting through, a suddenness.

Back then, I was looking for suddenness. That sudden upwelling my friends and I found best articulated in Lorca's marvelous seductive essay on the *duende*, still I think the best expression we have to hand of the sudden presence of deity in our struggling song and dance.

And I called that thing, our blue flower, the Deep Image. Deep not out of appeal to depth psychology so-called, more with reference to the 'deep structure' of linguistics – the rule beneath the apparent feature, deep too because the image we meant did not have to be (as in the miraculous rejuvenation of the early 1900s, Pound's Imagisme), the image did not have to be a visualizable, namable *thing*. But thingliness had always been our best guide.

When I explain this to students nowadays, I say: I am trying to teach you to write Thinglish.

Deep image was Thinglish Grammar forgotten into dream and awakened by music.

The individuals back then, you ask about them. What a great company we were, what a fantastic chevere I was permitted to be part of. The company of those days – like Gerrit Lansing’s wonderful phrase “the company of love / safe in the garden that is themselves.” How can anyone work without a company? Olson used to say that Shakespeare was what he was because the actors were all there, and all of them playwrights too. And that Duncan would have been Shakespeare had he had the Company.

There we were. A group of close friends, The great Paul Blackburn the eldest, the clearest, the best established in a world of letters. He brought us not only the sharpest attention to syllable, pause, line length –music, in other words – that I had ever encountered or even thought of – I’ll say more about him. But he was my link to Pound, whom he had known, and corresponded with. Blackburn with his meticulous but exuberant translations of

the Provençal poets – restricting himself in his *pietas* to those poems only that Pound had not translated – and his own sculpturally vivid registrations of love in the city—they moved me more than Proensa, but they couldn't have been 'found' *trobada*, without Proensa..

The rest of us were more of an age: Jerome Rothenberg bringing his vast enthusiasm for any poetry that wasn't the Anglo-American canon, who brought us strange treasures from otherworlds (via the translations of translations we all did in those days), but most importantly from so many worlds he knew and strove in: *Yiddhishkeit* and Seneca, Navaho and Polish – all the influences he was going to blend in that great structure of ethnopoetics he was to construct over the years. But most of all back then what got me was his work from the contemporary Germans, Celan above all – and Rothenberg was the first to bring Celan into American poetry. So there are two close friends bringing to their friends Ezra Pound and Paul Celan – do you see the excitement, the 'beautiful contradictions' (Tarn's great phrase, meaning otherwise) of those days? Rothenberg too, with his wife Diane, the anthropologist who poured a lot of sheer fact and lucidity and sagacity into our discourse, were the social presence that united us – their big

apartment way uptown between Broadway and the river, was the welcoming Sealed Garden of our endless palaver.

And George Economou (with whom I had founded the *Chelsea Review*, now *Chelsea*, only to abandon it when it lost its focus, and with whom I went on to found *Trobar*, which was, small as its lifespan, one of the two ‘classic’ embodiments of Deep Image, along with Rothenberg’s *Poems from the Floating World*.), George brought mediaeval lyric, Spenser’s dream epic, Chaucer’s versecraft he and I had both been studying when we met at Columbia, but he also brought modern Greek poetry, a language native to him. Kavafis and Elytis and Gkatsos were the ones that stood out for me. I had learned of Kavafis (as Cavafy) from Durrell and Forster, but only as a presence, a mood, a wise old voice – but from Economou I heard Kavafis, the craftsman, the young but wearying lover whose love was spent on vowels, his phrases looped around the beloved’s half-reluctant throat. I can still hear George speaking the tumble of his syllables, *a-óratos thíasos na perná* – this was another way of hearing into the heart of the poem.

Armand Schwerner was there with his native grasp of French, and there too he gave us the blessedly divided world, the crazed

inventiveness of Michaux (my favorite at the time) alongside the solemnity of Paul Claudel, whom Armand couldn't quite take seriously, but couldn't quite dismiss either. I remember a reading when Michaux's "Mon Roi" and Claudel's "The Muse Who is Grace" both got read... But this was a Schwerner who did all that in the context of his joyous and detailed readings of Wallace Stevens – amazing to me, because Stevens had always been my secret altar, and his long poems (Adagia, An Ordinary Evening, The Comedian) had seemed the closest anyone had come to what I was after.

And my friend from CCNY, David Antin always eroding the easy lyric, insisting on the intelligential, the acute. He tried so hard to take me in hand and chasten my lust for the gorgeous. His distaste for lyric lushness did finally become a guide to me –one I didn't always or even often follow, but kept in mind, still do. And his measured, witty dance around the edge of prose, working already at what would become his 'measure,' the spoken grace of intelligent discourse – he more than any kept us close to the acerbic eroticism of Andre Breton and the surrealists, who in a sense were our truest generators. And his spoken/written work over the years has been a pole star of intelligence and clarity, spilling

out of what poets usually talk about into what we must learn to talk about, everything.

So many more in that company, the painter and critic Amy Mendelson (or Amy Goldin) who brought me and the rest of us directly into the heart of the action in painting just at the moment when painting was the best thing happening in New York. Her still unpublished long theoretical assessment of Georges Duthuit's huge anthological rebuttal of Andre Malraux's imaginary museum was a text that guided my awareness of art as specific generator of discourse, and a vital guide to just how alive language can be when talking about. And she, curiously or not, was the one of all of us who most abruptly and usefully saw and saw through our poems. Hers was the reaction that I wished for and feared most – she taught me something like *pudor*, a certain sense of shame a poet must have, not to be always I I I-ing. And intelligence the surest weapon against the cant of feeling.

So that was the fervor we were in when I first began to discover other contemporaries who had been through some of what I passed through, and found their own brilliant way towards our 'vulgar eloquence,' that is, the beauty of the vernacular itself: Robert Duncan above all, Jack Spicer, and the more austere Charles



Olson. When I began to know their work, and explore their solutions, real and imaginary, to the isolation of the ego in a world of music, I began to speak less of Deep Image – Rothenberg had always been suspicious of the phrase, though I think he was the first to use it in print, fearing it as a slogan. And in a modest way a slogan it became, sort of pre-empted by casual criticism to speak say of Robert Bly’s poetry, which always seemed to me more wit than dream (and therefore less frightening to bourgeois readers), more imagism + surrealism than the thing we meant: the journey to the depths with language as our only tool and music our only weapon.

Valéry had said, and I used it as the epigraph for my first book: “He who would go down into the self must go armed to the teeth.”

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As I was sorting through the work of the past two years, I came across this text, which I think speaks to some of these questions and answers we’ve been exchanging.

## **MAGIC**

is what I am about, the **verso**,  
the other side that means

and the thing that pierces through

*changing the condition of the other it beholds*

changing the beholding.

O's lying on their sides

eggs or eyes

to see through

the crack of vision

into the new world

the old one just out of sight

around the corner

of your shoulder

your tender upper arm.

Oriental sapphire our primal sky,

*color that renews the eyes*

verse means turn back

to the beginning

change direction

build an erection

from the sky down

conquer circumstance by sheer beholding

heavy rain over Victoria, fairy lights on the great hotel

where on a sunny day one has tea

in a palm court like a hidden garden

garden hidden in the house

woman hidden in the city

*become the act of beholding*

no subject beholding and no object beheld  
 no subject and no object, comma,  
 free,

*free means combinatorial,*

to count backwards,  
 respell, conspire,

breathe on bits of string

tie knots in air

free means to spell and cast  
 runes on circumstance

all this is your material, holy,  
 sacred species of ordinary things

in all your life you'll never touch  
 anything holier than this cheap bread  
 than this garbage can full of birdseed  
 this splinter of pressure-treated wood  
 peeled off the deck, this bulk-mail envelope,  
 this matchstick pointing to the moon  
 lost on the other side of the busy earth

o turn with me  
 into the timeless remonstrance  
 the wordless dream of alphabets  
 free to be things again

so poetry is to go  
to get there

verse is a turning back  
then turning back again

whirling on the heel of what you said  
to see who said it,  
answering and whirling back

*verse is turning*

turn in the furrow of the words  
turn in the line  
and find

                  turn over the rock  
where terror lurks  
legless or many-legged

and this fear gives substance to the rock  
without fear no solid thing

magic is all I ever meant

repel the political explanation

only in dreams to the banks dissolve  
and the chemical cloud  
that's all that's left  
blow away across the pale  
Ukrainian steppes, healed again  
of what no politics can change:

the sickness of contempt for the other  
which is at the root of capital

whereas magic adores the other  
does everything to touch the other  
turns inside out to be the other

magic is in love with what is most alternative,  
with every change,

*any chance to change*

into the actual other,  
in the other is our hope  
and all these men were women once.

16 May 2004

**TMR:** And this first book was *Armed Descent*, published in 1961 by Hawks Well Press. Were these your earliest poems, or a more discriminate collection? Do you feel the poems of *Armed Descent* bare the same matured sensibility as your later works, or was there a difference in your approach to poetics at the time of its publication?

**RK:** A few months after *Armed Descent* was published, I realized with a wonderful sense of relief that the Angel who looks after publication (who in the Renaissance some thought of as Saturn,

lord of printers and delay) had brought me to the book at just the right time. If the book had been collected six months earlier, I would not now be able to accept it as part of my own work. Something had happened –reading the Gospel of Thomas? Translating Neruda? Working with Blackburn on Cortázar? giving a lot of readings? meeting Duncan? reading Olson? corresponding with Lansing in the days of Set? all of these, surely. Whatever it was, it let me write the strongest pieces in that collection, and gave me the clarity to pull it together. And of course Joan (my first wife) helped me, as she always had done, not so much in the poem as towards the poem. Even now there's only a piece or two in it that makes me queasy. And when I got around to doing my big Selected Poems a decade ago (Red Actions), I was still glad to include six poems from AD. I think that first book gave a wide image of my concerns then and now – precise observation, ear attention, the vernacular, the rhapsodic, the investigative, the poetics of information, the obedience to language itself. I find those, or clear traces of those, in that first book. The long fragments (then called “Spiritum”) in it were the nucleus of my first long poem, published a year or so later in Origin N.S.5 as The Exchanges. So that even the long poem showed up in that very small first book, with its strange and beautiful cover, Mexican glyphs patterned by Rothenberg's hand. (An odd secret

satisfaction is that my first book was printed, like all the early Hawks Well Books apparently, in Ireland...)

But to the terms of your question: no, I don't think my sensibility had matured. I hope it has not yet even now matured. I mean I hope there are some more turns in the fabric before the garment is finally cut into permanent form – and thrown away. But the poems in *Armed Descent* are part of my work, and seem accurately to lead into most of what I've been learning and doing since then. But as I say, there are poems in it that no longer please me (though they too were doing their best in heading towards something or staking a claim on territory I would come to inhabit or at least explore.) There's even a poem or two in it that I feel pointing towards a kind of poem I have not yet dealt with, let alone mastered – a kind of dream narrative caught on the wind. I'm talking from memory at the moment – maybe I should go back and reread it. But I'm giving you the answer based on what that first book has meant and has been meaning to me all through my writing life – that's what's relevant here. I could instead go back and cast the critical eye on the book, but I'd rather keep my scalpel for the poems I'm writing today.

**TMR:** You grew up in Brooklyn, but your poems resonate with the consciousness of a world literature; where has your writing life taken you?

**RK:** Brooklyn is more important to me now than it was when I lived there. I didn't know where I was. We never know where we are till we aren't, I think. By now it's like Dublin for Joyce, a graph or grid on which subsequent experiences plot themselves and take on 'local habitation and a name.' The places where I lived then reveal themselves to me in the splendor of what they really mean now. Eden itself was probably just a scrappy old field, ill-watered and scant of foliage, to which departure gave a tinge of glory. I don't mean, by the way, that I'm at all nostalgic for Brooklyn – anymore than Joyce was for Dublin – in forty five years I've gone back to visit only once. It provided me with the trestleboard my life has been ordered by, it gave me a hint of the vast psychic Body in which a person's life unfolds, finding the limits and going beyond – as it says in the Purusa Sukta, the primordial being (that is, us and any one of us, you and me, you without me, etc.) had stretched out four finger-widths beyond the cosmos. We are always bigger than the world. But we begin where we begin, and though we have to grow our way out of it, it always is there, that place, like the subtle body glowing through



the physical one – like that fantastic painting by Varley you must know, it's in the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Risen Christ – where all the psychic veins show through – the actual city or place a man comes from is like that, it shows though in special moments the way the heaven of energy shows through in the resurrection. I want to say that our idiom is correct: we say a person is from Toronto, and that is truer than to say he comes from there.

When I lived in Brooklyn (and this is where I think your question is tending, right?) I wanted to be anyplace else. I felt that being born in Brooklyn especially (I lived in a neighborhood where English was hardly spoken), being born in America at all, was being born in exile. I feel ashamed to admit this now, but it's true. I wanted to be anywhere else. I was (as in the old G&S song) “the idiot who praises with enthusiastic tone / any century but this and any country but his own.” I am ashamed now that I wanted to be Irish or English or Ancient Greek or a prelate in the Middle Ages or a shaman in Tibet or German, or even Swiss and walk with Nietzsche in the Engadin. (I mention some of my special fascinations of otherwhens.) My especial connections were with Victorian England (why not? Victoria was still on the throne when my father was born, and my grandmother was from England) and Ancient Rome. I wanted to be then, walking Holborn and Hyde

Park and Hampstead Heath – that was my home, not these squawling shabby streets. And how did I know those places? From books, always from books. A mile away, over the border in Queens, was a storefront branch of the great New York Public Library system. Walking there and being there and walking home struggling with my satchel weighed down with books. Books. They gave me history – but they did not give my history. I was restless and surly, wanting a past of my own. I was too dumb or too shy or too blessed, who knows, to find my history in my own town, own people. I wanted more. And the books gave me, as they say, materials for thought. And that was all I needed to begin. Later, when I was around twelve, still in grammar school, I did volunteer work keeping open a parish library (another storefront) in Ridgewood, a long lovely bus ride over the hill. I was very big for my age, and could handle the job of keeping the place open. Catholic books, yes – but also Chesterton and Charles Williams, who were the great definers for me, even before Kipling and Stevenson. They were the ones who took the boy's earlier delight in adventure per se – Dumas, Hugo, Verne, all of whom I loved what I could find of their work – and turned it towards a palpable or implicit spiritual quest. And led me to the Grail legend, which became for me (as for god knows how many thousands of writers in the past thousand years, no snob me) the armature of structure,

the touchstone of meaningfulness. Never a meaning you could make explicit, always there, in the shadows round the ruined chapel.

So the magic city of London, the Grail legends, the orientalism of travel books, the heroism of the Antarctic and Himalaya explorers, the sense above all that story was the instrument of revelation. All that was clear to me before I even began to read literature per se, as colleges think or thought of it. And when I did begin reading, maybe at 14 or so, people like Joyce and Pound, they were half-illicit discoveries I thought nobody knew about.

I was trying to find my place to stand, my word to speak. I say I'm ashamed now of having been not just an anglo-phile but an allo-phile, in love with everywhere but here. But I'm not ashamed of what that silly boyhood infatuation with Rome and Westminster was a temporary mark of, a sense of being in exile, a sense that has never left me, a sense that has been often appeased if not cured by the intense here-ness of love, and the lucid nowhere of meditation.

I'm sorry this is taking so long. There were no kids in my neighborhood who had any interest at all in things that concerned me (books, history, science, music), but I finally, around 9 or so,

met a boy around the corner who, like me, had a chemistry set. Our discourse never got beyond that, and mostly complaining that, with the War still on, we couldn't get supplies. But I felt no loneliness – it never occurred to me, in fact, that I needed people to talk to. I related to everyone around me on the basis of their concerns, and kept my own to myself. I was well into high school before I met anyone who knew as much as – and then to my shame, even more than – I did. So I got used to keeping everything going happily, and I do mean happily, within.

And the great other energy those books, stories, visions, brought me was right there for me, all the time: language itself. The material of all phantasy and discovery, right there in the dictionary. And all the dictionaries. Back then, it was languageS – it wasn't till graduate school (working with Martinet and Weinreich in linguistics) that I began to get a sense of language itself.

Just today I found a little poem from 2004 (perhaps it will wind up in the huge and endless collection I call Sheet Music) that teases my childhood:

When I was actually little

I had a bottle of ink  
and the lovely color of it was named Azul

how different it seemed from the words  
I found mentioned on the other side of the box  
I tried to write with azul but it always came out blue.

So languages carried me (how slow I am in answering this question, forgive me) toward. Latin (which always seems somehow like my native language, from church) and Greek and German, those are the ones I studied in school. Later learned to read French and Spanish. Studied Chinese and Russian and Japanese and Gaelic – just to see what they were like, just for the sheer interest of learning what was there.

When puberty went through me, that prairie fire abolishing or changing all my values left me strange nights of listening to Mahler, staring at big Chinese characters I had copied from Pound's Cantos and pinned up on my wall. In those quiet nights I gazed at Goodwin and Gulick's Greek Grammar (really, 4Gs) and found in the 360 inflections of the verb a kind of beauty and

sensuality of time and mood and circumstance that somehow, briefly, just barely, stood in for the knowing I yearned for.

But eventually, of course, life brings itself to us. I wanted to see Europe, I was in college, majoring German at CCNY. My parents kindly let me go – I had planned to take a summer course in German at Göttingen, and another in Salzburg. This was 1954. I sailed away and got no further than Paris. There was cholera in the Rhineland, no travel. Paris was wonderful. I got sick with an infected jaw but stayed there for weeks, came home. Paris is what I wanted and needed. No Louvre, no churches (though I climbed Notre-Dame's tower to see the city, refusing on atheistical grounds to enter the nave), no sightseeing: just the city itself. A city is the greatest work of art. It was more than enough. Those three weeks in Paris are still with me. Another trestleboard, perhaps. Though I've been back countless times, always rousing, always enlarging.

But I never got to Germany. It was only thirty years later I crossed the Rhine and finally entered a realm whose language had been my study for so long – my first job at Bard had actually been as Instructor of German – long before I ever entered the country.

So in body I did finally come to some of My Countries. France above all, Mexico, Austria, England, Scotland, Ireland, Italy, India – our last big trip was to India a couple of years ago, to the Punjab in the hottest season, and the foothills. I’m not a bad traveler once I get started. But I hate leaving. Not just leaving home. Leaving anywhere. So when I’m about to leave for a trip – whether it’s overnight or a month – I am in acute discomfort and deregulation. Ditto when it’s time to come home. I am where I am, finally. And carry my Here with me, and hate the distraction – the pretense! – of seeming to be somewhere else.

**TMR:** Academia, you've mentioned, is something you wanted to avoid. How did the opportunity with Bard come about? How has your history with the school unraveled?

**RK:** I have to begin by saying that Academia is everywhere. It is no longer the rarefied scholarly tower or the preppy finishing school. It’s everywhere. People in prisons take A.A. degrees. Someone calculated that one-quarter of the population of the United States is directly or indirectly involved in the education business. The ‘academic’ that I dreaded when I was a young poet was the sort of English-Department attitude of complacent acceptance of traditional poetic ‘values,’ ‘craft’ and so on. I found

myself saying that really the only craft is perfected attention. And that phrase, craft is perfected attention, got picked up and anthologized now and again. I stand by it. It's not something you learn to apply. It's something you learn to be.

Truly, schools are no worse places for learning than anywhere else. At least they give people a chance to hold off entering the labor-world, last touches of that moneyless quandary called childhood. I don't know. Schools. I hated school when I was a child, as I've said. I wonder if my students are as appallingly bored in my classes now as I was then. I hope not, but how could they not be?

Maybe the chance is this: school is different now: We have reformed education in the light of the entertainment industry. Our scheduling, marketing and packaging of information and skill have turned classes into 'programs' with the same neat weekly or daily recurrence of a tv show. And classes are appreciated as such, boring or fascinating as may be, because they're not being compared to freedom or following the mind's time's way, but just compared to other 'programs,' other courses. People compare books, or compare films. But only to other books, other films. No one thinks of comparing a film to no-film. How is reading this



book better than not reading anything at all? Reflections like these, along with the sense of paying-for-the-passage-of-time, are what make me think of education and entertainment as part of the same huge industry – an industry for which we need a new name (like Mr Eisenhower’s famous warning about the ‘military-industrial complex,’ we need a caution about an Entertainment-Education-Religion Complex ). When you examine the norms by which teachers are rated by their students, many of the questions boil down to: do you enjoy the passage of time? does the class make you feel good? does the teacher give you the sense of being an expert? does he radiate care for you and attention to your needs? I don’t think these are the marks of a good teacher an Athenian would look for.

But they are what the social function – not intellectual function—of education as an industry requires today. I’m not even against them. Since the beginning of time, artists (poets, musicians, dramatists, novelists) have been paid for what ultimately is: the shaping of time as it passes. That is what *rhythmos* is, the shaping of audible or sensible or tactile experience – the word from which rhythm and rhyme both come, the potter’s craft of shaping on the wheel when the clay is time itself.

So arts have been absorbed always by the entertainment industry (of any era recent or ancient) – so that until recent history there has never been a point of distinguishing art from entertainment – and I'm not sure there's any difference now, except in our own artist's hauteur and self-importance, we're not mere entertainers.

But of course we all are, just like the athlete, the ballplayer, the professor of biology, the concert pianist, the experimental composer, the pole dancer, the preacher, the bishop, the rapper, the tenor, the actor, the tv news anchor – each is standing before a body politic and shaping their experience of time and mind.

So into education has entered that ancient and honorable craftsman, the histrio, the master clown, the impersonator, the man who speaks through masks, the woman who speaks through the smoke of burning laurel leaves. Art, it all is art.

It is not so much that the arts have entered education (though most American artists, of whatever kind, are directly dependent on universities for their everyday income) as that education has itself become an art form.

Dear TMR, forgive me for this lecture (I have lived too long in the classroom), but I had to get off my chest what the business we're talking about when we say academia actually is. Now I can offer a few straight answers to the question.

All through college and graduate school I hoped to be teach in college. Not as a scholar, but as a writer. Not a teacher of writing (such things were virtually unknown in those days), but a teacher of reading, literature, story, who could sustain his own writing life through his income as a teacher. The plan was common in those days, obvious.

But by the time I had finished all my graduate courses and requirements at Columbia (working first in Seventeenth Century intellectual history with Marjorie Nicholson and Pierre Garai, then in Mediaeval Studies with Roger Sherman Loomis briefly then Howard Schless, meanwhile 'minoring' in linguistics) and was ready to begin a dissertation (for the record it was something like: *The Concept of the Mystical Company in Malory's Working of the Vulgate Cycle of the Grail Romance*) I was already caught up full-time in the poetry world of New York: writing, giving and arranging readings, editing the *Chelsea Review*, etc, I had to come to a decision, and with the support and guidance of my wife, Joan,

and the pressure of the Spirit, I made it, and abandoned the dissertation and turned to what I dared to think of as ‘my own work.’ And though I still wanted to teach in college, I resolved that my first obligation was to the work, the Work, and that if I did that, and was faithful to that, all would be well.

And so it has turned out, even as far as teaching goes. I never did get a doctorate (at least till the honorary Doctor of Letters degree from SUNY Oneonta), and the lack of it never held me back. I don’t think the same would be true today, though you never can tell with the angels...

George Economou, then still working hard on his doctorate, got a job at Wagner College on Staten Island, and somehow inveigled them into having me teach there the next year. And so I did, 1960-61, in a department with Willard Maas, the poet and film maker, whose beautiful short film *Geography of the Body*, to a text by George Barker, had dazzled me when I was in high school. The teaching was hard – 8 in the morning till one, five days a week. And to get there at eight --from Brooklyn by subway to South Ferry then ferry to St. George then two buses to the college – I had to get up at 5. Since I was seldom in bed before two or three, it

was a hard pull. I found I didn't like teaching very much, and at the end of the year decided: never again.

That decision lasted about a month. I began to get phone calls from a Bard College, about which I knew nothing at all, except that the young poet Jonathan Greene was a student there, and my pen-pal from England of several years standing, the poet and novelist Paris Leary whom I'd never yet met, had come home to America and was teaching there. And the two of them wanted me to come and teach German – since the German instructor had just leaved with a student. I laughed and refused. The next day they called again, and again I declined, not wanting to teach, not feeling sufficient mastery of German. The day after that the president of the college called, and offered me a free beautiful new apartment, just come up and look around. I explained my ill-preparedness, but he suggested I just come up for a visit. The president himself, the late Reamer Kline, met me at the old bus depot in Kingston (where Lorca had once stepped off the bus, and wept at what he saw). I came to Annandale and was conquered. The beautiful countryside, the huge free apartment (after our seamy Bedford-Stuyvesant two-room flat), and some instinct in me all had their say. I said yes. During that afternoon, I was interviewed by the various potentates of the college, including the poet Ted Weiss

who was the presiding spirit of literature in the place. I could feel they didn't much like me. But I still accepted. A strange thing: to be asked three times to take a job in a place where I felt at once at home, and yet where I sensed I was disliked by the natives. How odd that still is, and what a combination of doggedness, dumbness, and trust in Fortuna I must have wielded.

I entered teaching with the naïve idea that all I had to do was talk people into reading and looking closely at what they read, and connecting what they read with the world in which the text had been written and that other world, now, in which the text was being read. And strangely enough that naïve idea turned out to be true. Or at least true enough that I don't know any better way to describe what's at stake.

It has been wonderful teaching at Bard. The place (speaking psycho-geographically) has a fantastic energy. And the students, year after year after year, have been magnificent. Whenever I've gone off to teach elsewhere over the years (Buffalo, USC, Cal Tech, Tufts, Yale) I've always hurried back. For the students; never anywhere have I seen anything like the intensity and talent in so many students. To this very day.

During my first decade at Bard, there were very few faculty here I felt at all close to. Heinrich Bluecher (husband of Hannah Arendt) was my guide and friend – his Common Course was a paragon of meaningful intellectual history. And the actor and playwright Robert Rockman welcomed Joan and me into his home and affections – the dearest, kindest, funniest man. Later more and more interesting people began to come. And then after the arrival of Leon Botstein, Bard’s president and one of the truly great men I have known (a man who knows very little in fact of his own greatness), people began to arrive -- until Bard now is a delight to be in. The students are still great. But now I have as colleagues people like John Ashbery and Ann Lauterbach, Mary Caponegro, Joan Retallack, Chinua Achebe, Bradford Morrow, Michael Ives, Celia Bland, Norman Manea, Susan Rogers, David Levi Strauss, Ian Buruma, Luc Sante.

One thing I learned early: the hardest thing of all about teaching is this—that the ordinary person in speaking is responsible only for what he says. The teacher is responsible for what they hear and understand. This is a vital lesson to the poet too, isn’t it?

**TMR:** Shelley went so far as to write, “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”. What are your thoughts on bearing up under the responsibilities of a poet?

**RK:** Not so much responsibility as privilege. People have to find the materials or minds to do work on the world, for the world; the poet has at least the materials right there in the mouth. Words. Language, which is always there and common to all, so the poet is always walking through familiar places, holding familiar objects to display to those around about. Making them unfamiliar, so they can be seen. Language, no matter how arcane we become with it, language keeps us always with other people. Joyce’s polysemous and difficult tongueplay in the late work comes out of his fierce determination to respond to the social fact, we dream in language and wake to speak. Language is always social. Language *is* the other – the other in our own mouths.

The poet is someone who has nothing to say except what language lets. And ‘let’ is an old, odd word in English, that means both permit (let the children play) and prohibit (let and hindrance). Language lets, poets listen, and that listening is their main responsibility, when coupled with what language lets them, makes them say, keeps them from saying.



Maybe the deepest responsibility of the poet is the simplest: Keep talking.

The enterprise that Shelley spoke of, despite his own voluminous political writing, I think is true because of the adjective. The more unacknowledged we are, the more effective legislators we are. Unacknowledged even by ourselves. Especially by ourselves.

Look, poetry works when it reveals and when it gives pleasure. Those are the two things I know it can do. It can also bore and preach and fulminate and be disagreeable, can murmur confessions best left in the leatherette diary with the little heart-shaped lock, can posture politically and be very, very self-important.

But when the poet is the legislator, the poet is not sounding off. The poet is sounding. Not what I think about the government, but what language lets me speak into the whirlwind around me.

Personally, I don't think propaganda helps. I think political poetry doesn't accomplish much; it just makes us feel a little relief, venting. I guess that's not so bad, sometimes we have to get it off our chests, personally -- but that shouldn't make us feel we've

accomplished something when the audience applauds us for agreeing with their beliefs. We haven't accomplished anything. So I don't much like poetry that's just venting, whether it's venting about your girlfriend or venting about the president. I think poets have a special responsibility in a terrible time which is not discharged by saying How terrible this time!

In a terrible time, under terrible government, I think the poet has to work by subversion. By disconnecting. By making new connections. Jewels are found by digging, by standing still in running water. By armchair psychoanalysis and expropriated museums, by whatever we can learn about what anybody anywhere thinks. By surrealism, Russian Formalism, dreams half-remembered, cheesy interpretations,, pennywhistles, love toys, steamboats, history books, lies, confessions of imaginary sins, multiplication of voices, Pessoa-nations, Poundian clarities and Joycean murk, Chinese whispers, listening and making the best of what you hear. Listening.

Sounds like play, doesn't it? Sanskrit *lila*, Tibetan *rolpa* – the play of mind which is the play of the world.

The only thing I really look to a poem for is revelation. I think poetry is a true revelator in this time, especially in this time, when all the different bibles babble so loud you need the desert calm of the feeble poem to hear a new word come to life. What the poem reveals is what the poet didn't know – that's the first test. When the poem surprises you by what it's just made you say, or made your hand write, then we're on the way.

The poet's responsibility is revelation. Not just to say what has never been thought. But to say in clear words something that *cannot* be thought. Let language lead the way. To play while the grown-ups do that frightening compulsive thing they do and they call work. To hope that they will see us playing, and be disturbed or distracted or entranced. And join us.

To change the world one person at a time. The strange fact of the poem in a book: it happens to one person at a time. And it makes us do the happening. Music happens to us, but we have to read the poem. That makes us complicit in its coming-into-presence. And that complicity in turn, makes us co-workers of the utterance. The words become us.

**TMR:** We have hardly skimmed the surface of poetry, and we will

return to it, but I'd like to know more about you as a writer of prose. Many poets have tried their hand at it, some successfully and some otherwise. What is your relationship with prose? Any works in progress, or plans for prose in the future? Which writers are important to you, as both a reader and a writer?

**RK:** When I was fourteen, I climbed the side steps of the great New York Public Library and demanded a library card. (For years I had had cards from Brooklyn and Queens, separate systems. This was the Big Time at last.) When I was filling out the application, the blank space beside "Occupation" I paused over – certain of the answer, but timid of inscribing it – then wrote down Writer. I have tried to live up to that commitment. Through the years, I have felt more and more the centrality of writing to my task. I'm told I'm a good conversationalist, and I enjoy talking and discoursing –and listening—for hours. But nothing of that really counts until it's inscribed. Yes, I know that what one says, and perhaps even what one thinks, gets inscribed somehow in the spaces of the world – the Akashic record of the old Theosophists, perhaps. But what mattered to me is getting it written down. Writing is from *writan*, to scratch something in. No wonder I like pens.

Once it's written, I'm not so studious to preserve it. I can enjoy the thought of Li Po writing poems all the drunken night and setting them to sail away in the river. Once it's written, the text takes care of itself. *Habent sua fata libelli.*

But get it written down. Words start speaking in me, and I write them down, and wait for more. After a while, as words come and I begin to write more of them down, the sense of form begins to declare itself. Form is a physical presence, form is a big animal close to my chest and arms, pressing on me. In resisting it, the work under hand takes shape. For a while, I don't know (don't think about, don't care) whether it's what will get called a poem or fiction or prose or essay. That's up to it, as it discloses itself to and through me.

So I have a sort of allergy to genre discussions; I think the notion is confining and only marginally useful. (The old Dewey Decimal System used to separate novels from essays from plays from poems, even if all by the same author – order more important than sense.) Writing is the act. Poetry is the name by which I call the result – poiesis, I guess is what I have in mind, the 'making' which the Greeks privileged eventually by focusing the term only on the

written-made. Poets are those who make language available beyond the time of the spoken.

Prose is a subtle form. The musical interruptions that give prose rhythmic shape are less obvious and less regular than those that weave silence into speech in a poem. Anyone who has heard Faulkner reading, or Ed Dorn, or James Agee, or James Joyce, knows something of the incredible variety of prose music.

Sometimes I have been allowed to bestir myself in those measures, and make the long summer drone of prose. When I was in college, I started a novel called, almost symptomatically, *The Moment of Saying*. Man and woman, inability to communicate, even lasting longer than the inability to make contact. To live with someone and still not be able to say it. Say it. I did not know what it was, but I knew it had to be said. The novel went nowhere.

Then a few stories now and then. (One called “An Assassination of the Czar” was published in a jazz magazine, I recall it fondly, and the sneaky way it turned itself into a poem at the end. I think. I haven’t seen it in many years.) It wasn’t till the mid-Sixties that I started to write anything seriously in prose — till then I had almost struggled against it, feeling morally and aesthetically committed to the notion that it (remember it?) had to be said in poetry. Then one day I found myself at a reading proclaiming to my own

surprise and with the authority that I seem to take on in front of a crowd, that the next big move in the New American Poetry would be in prose.

I listened to myself. My love for stories, episodic adventures, horror, marvels, detective fiction, told me I could simply write the book that I wanted to read. And that's always the best way for me in prose fiction – to write what I want to read, write what I wish someone else had written to spare me the effort. (And there have been many books I came to and felt just that way about, o bless you, Evan S. Connell, for writing *Notes from a Manuscript Found on the Beach at Carmel* (or whatever that marvelous book was called), bless you, Thomas Pynchon, for *The Crying of Lot 49*, bless you, Sebald, for *The Rings of Saturn*, bless you, Hermann Broch, for *The Death of Virgil*, and you, Bill Gaddis, for *The Recognitions*, which I read when it came out and I was very young, and would never be the same, and you too, Burroughs, for *The Naked Lunch*, which I almost did have to write from my subway years, you saved me, and John Crowley for “*The Great Work of Time*,” and for *Ægypt*.),

But I had to write *The Scorpions* for myself, 1966, and then when it was finished, ending on that sad high note nowhere, the energy

of writing it carried right on into Cities. Other projects came up and went down (a sequel to *The Scorpions* – don't even ask – and a novel called *Romby* set in the bleak near-future, standard post-catastrophe romance, then a long delicate almost-novel about life in the Hudson Valley slightly in the future with one of the dwindling local aristo families caught up in politics, then a sequel to that where the president's mistress sets out on her own through a damaged America till she finds herself in the Court of the Emperor Joseph II in Las Vegas, all of these are somewhere in nowhere, and I'm dredging them up because you ask). It wasn't till the mid-Seventies that I got seriously into fiction again. (I had, in 1975-1976 while living in California, written with ferocious intensity and amazing freedom the long poem called *The Loom*, which itself is intricate with narrative – which was, in fact, when it came down to it, a laboratory of narrative beginnings. How to begin anywhere. How to go on. In that poem, music and silence helped, moving me along.) I began a novel that I wound up calling *Parsifal*, because it explored the central narreme of the Grail legend: the man who does not know who he is, who only slowly, painfully, learns the nature (which is I suppose the destiny) of his own identity through his effect on other people. The wonderful thing about *Perceval/Parsifal* in the legends and the opera is: he doesn't know who he is. Other people do. For all the Christian tones and



overtones, the century that discovered, via Marx, its central problem as the alienation of the subject, the worker, had to recognize in sweet Parsifal its truest symbol. A Christ, yes, but a Christ whose cross is alienation, loss of identity: the person crossed out.

Anyhow. My novel got very long. I wrote it exclusively long-hand (The Loom I was able to compose only at the typewriter – I still have the old Olympia office machine – but Parsifal I could only compose by hand, in bound school notebooks – I am always wax in the hands of my means. Every writing instrument has a poem in it for me, how to unleash it?) I recall one summer day and night and dawn when I wrote 20,000 words. When it finally was typed, it came to 1,935 pages – auspicious I thought, since I was born in 1935. I worked the next summer revising the typed version, then set it aside. Where it has sat for thirty years. Meantime, the East Germany in which the book opens has disappeared, though the Switzerland most of it takes place in is still just as it was, the south shore of Lake Constance, over by Romanshorn and Rorschach. The book became so long because of a double determination of mine: I was resolved to write a book where actual people endure or enjoy the actual passage of time, that is to say, a narrative with a consecutive linear timeline, and

where people live the events of every day, and time passes for them, meaningfully perhaps. But at the same time I was telling this story of sexual discovery and personal self-discovery and Ancient Egypt and mediaeval heretics and Mithraic survivals and all the interesting stuff. I think it works. I think the people and the events in which they're caught up, in real time and dream time, coincide. All novels finally have to become family stories, I'm afraid, so I had to go there too. Reluctantly, as I'll go on about in a minute.

But meantime. Recently I've wanted to go back and get the thing completed. I feel some guilt to the book, not much to the public, since I've kept producing poems and other things for years without stint. A student assistant is typing the revised typescript afresh into a Word file, so I can come to know it again, and perhaps at last let it out the door.

After that year of Parsifal, it became a frequent diversion or delight or sometimes compulsion for me to write short fiction, sometimes very short. (I invented that moniker "Sudden Fiction" that people began to use a decade or more back when several anthologies came out so called – it wasn't the length that persuaded me, but the lightning flash of it, for writer and reader both.) Four collections

of shorter fiction have been published, *A Transparent Tree*, *Doctor of Silence*, *Cat Scratch Fever* and *Queen of Terrors*, and some of those have been translated into Italian and German – indeed, my fiction got bigger play in Germany than it ever had here. There’s a fifth collection’s worth of material sitting here, waiting for me to attend to it. But in the past few years I’ve been more concerned with the long poem again... *Threads*, *Opening the Seals*, *The Language of Eden*. So recently the parlando of extended prose is *mum*. *Stumm, stumm*, as *Zerbinetta* says.

There are two exceptions. At the suggestion of the German poet Birgit Kempker (with whom I’d done a story-length collaboration several years ago), she and I wrote a text called *Scham/Shame*, a novel-sized bilingual exploration of shame and all its fertile powers of making us feel and function. We wrote alternate chapters (B-odd, R-even), and at the very end, translated each other’s work. So the printed volume (Editions Urs Engeler, Cologne/McPherson & Co., Kingston) contains everything in both languages. But because we were each other’s translators, we also were each other’s intentional (shame!) and unintentional revisers...more to the point, all the English is mine (in some sense), all the German hers.

The other exception is this novel I've been working at intermittently, but mentally steadily, for several years. *The Book from the Sky* is several describable things – an alien abduction story, a dual-personality story, a religious cult story – but these descriptions may be misleading. It's almost finished, by the way, and I hope to let people read it by summer's end.

Now to the last part of your question. Who. When I started thinking about this, I took notes, and filled a page with lightly penciled names, my masters. I can list them all here, and probably will do, but the strangest thing would be to try to say how each work moved me, instructed me, made me its pupil. And that would take the rest of my life, like the fabled map some Oriental despot commanded that mapped everything in the empire on its own scale, so the map wound up just as big as the territory. But I'm afraid my map of the island would be even bigger than the island. Because there's not only what the book did to me when I first read it, and what the book accomplished on its own terms in the history of consciousness (which is to such a large degree a history of books), but how the book continues to work on me and other writers who write their versions and torsions, So that all literature can be read as, thought of as, a tribe of half-conscious sequels.

But I have to say their names. The great prose writers, most of them concerned with the Novel (novella = the news), but some of them with other varieties of the news. I set them down as I think of them, all mixed together the Ones who taught me how to tell, the Ones who taught me what kinds of things can be told, the Ones who taught me how to tell into an evolving structure. Some of them I still read, some I read intently once and likely not again in this lifetime. All of them I feel gratitude and reverence towards. I mean by that a feeling of warmth and affection and tenderness comes over me when I just hear their names: Joyce, Sterne, Swift, Melville, Herodotus, Thomas Browne, Malory, Kafka, Lucius Apuleius, Wolfram von Eschenbach, The Mabinogion, Thomas Mann, Rabelais, Dostoevsky, Rilke's fiction, Hoffmann, Novalis, Nietzsche – those are the first ones for me. And later along came Twain, Wodehouse, Johnson, Hesse, Stein, Flaubert, Musil, Wyndham Lewis, Perec, Heidegger, see how everything gets mixed together, Ruskin, Kleist, Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Tolstoy (but just War and Peace), Hofmannsthal, Gide, Céline, Broch, Bulgakov, Saramago, Malaparte, The Pilgrimage to the West and its exact contemporary or almost its alter ego, Don Quixote, "The Twenty Five Zombies" (the great Sanskrit cycle mostly known through Zimmer's The King and the Corpse), Buber's Tales of the

Hasidic Masters, Sebald, Benjamin's Arcades Project. And the great storytellers of our own language, Stevenson, Chesterton, Kipling, Buchan, Haggard, and their magical child Borges, and then those strange writers, mostly excluded from the canon (and therefore safe to go on rousing and renewing), who took fear and awe as their subject as other writers had taken love: Poe, Shiel, Lovecraft, Machen, M.R. James, and Charles Williams who balanced fear and love like some Thames-side sephirothic tree. Three I came to late: Henry James, whose work held me off for years because of its concerns, outer concerns at least, with property and propriety, until I could no longer resist the sensuous intelligence of his sentences, the sustained richness of his distinctions. John Cowper Powys, admirable, deplorable, lovable – a man who searched out the meaning of what it means to be a human male – not the job, not the role, but the male existence itself, the tender, yearning, hopeful, terror of a man. His *A Glastonbury Romance* is a great novel, but he's a hard taste to acquire, it took me years, then suddenly he was for a while all I wanted to read, his flaws as wonderful as his successes. Finally, a shame to know how long before I read him all the way through, Proust. *The Remembrance* is one of the first books I ever bought, but I never did more than read *Swann's Way* and look for romance in *The Cities of the Plain*. Then finally, less than ten years ago, I

read it straight through, and knew it at last for what it is, a single, immense book, not a series. The greatest of all novels, the perfection of the form and what the form can do, when the story stretches out over all the world a person ever has. I am still shivering from it, remembering, re-reading, reading here and there in French, reading Proust's other works, essays, pastiches, always coming back to the Magisterium of that one life work.

There, that didn't take so long after all. I haven't spoken about many of the contemporary French masters, Derrida, Lacan, Barthes, Blanchot – they are important to me, but like Heidegger, more so as [what I think of as] poets. With the French, poetry takes leave of the line, perhaps forever. But that's another story.

Let me finish my answer by giving a little list of little books, mostly unknown, or known and not much read, that have been very important to me in my own growth – some of them perhaps are just my Velveteen Rabbit, some sentimental toy that shaped a sensibility. But gratitude (and admiration) still compel. So here are some hidden books, for a blessing: Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth*. Herbert Read, *The Green Child*. Hogg, *Private Memoirs of a Justified Sinner*. Joseph Roth, *Endless Escape*. Haniel Long, *Interlinear to Cabeza da Vaca*. Rene Daumal, *Mount*

Analogue. Cicero, 'The Dream of Scipio' in Book Ten of the Republic. Robert Graves, *Seven Days in New Crete*. Arthur Machen, *The Three Impostors*, T. L. Beddoes, *Death's Jest Book*. 'John Phoenix,' *The Squibob Papers*. E.T.A.Hoffmann, "The Mines at Falun". Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "The Letter of Lord Chandos," Robert Anthelme, *The Human Species*, Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*.

And even as I want to stop listing, they still keep coming to mind. I haven't spoken of my living aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters - - and there are many, many, whose work I admire and study and delight in. But let this list of the great dead be enough – they are the ones who came first to the vineyard of the moment.

But there has been a lapse in my answer. I have left something out. Earlier I mentioned my reluctance in writing a family novel, though my Parsifal finally did have to become one (just as Wolfram's and Wagner's ultimately do – the son reconciled with his literal heritage). I need to explain what I mean. What I need to say here is that my own taste, my own neuroses, have always led me to those texts where the character struggles to be free of family, or is from the beginning free. And the distinction is vital here that I want to make between family and parents. The struggle with or



against the mother, the father – of course that is part of all our lives, and the energy of that reconciliation – successful as in Proust, failed as in Joyce – can drive the best books we have. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the new-made man was a man without a family, born too early into a world spiderwebbed with relationships. But the 'modern Prometheus' is the man without relationships, and his arctic destiny both scares us and I think inspires us.

But the family saga -- that somehow eludes my interest and affection, be it Icelandic or Galsworthy. Look though how a master like E.M.Forster (in *Howard's End*) or Ford Madox Ford (in *Parade's End* – and how could I have left him off the list?) can take the circumstances of family and reconstruct them as individual struggle.

When I read Balzac, I am utterly overwhelmed by his great studies of the isolato, the person set apart – the beautiful Louis Lambert, or *The Wild Ass Skin*, "The Unknown Masterpiece", *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* – which is itself a kind of alchemical distillation of the horror of the family. But the great family tragedies (*Père Goriot* most of all) terrify me – that's all I can say. Here I must be coming from my own childhood. I had something like forty uncles

and aunts – by blood and marriage – and an unreckonable tribe of cousins. That was family. And juxtaposed against them were my own parents. The trinity, then: Family around Parents around Child. And that was what the child I was saw happening, I had to side with the parents against the family. And finally had to accept the monstrosity of my own apartness. And try to learn about it, the way kids did and do, by reading books.

I think I am too thin-skinned for that battle, as Dr Johnson could not bring himself to see or read the last scenes of King Lear. It is just this curious mingling of terror, impatience, and sentimental squeamishness that has kept me from Dickens all my life, as much as I admire *The Pickwick Papers* (perhaps the first really experimental novel) and the sheer cornucopia of his style, the uncanny openings of *Bleak House* and of *Great Expectations*. But then the families begin their sinister machinations, and I shrink away. I get so uncomfortable that I have to stop reading. To this day I don't know whether I'm making a superior aesthetic point, or giving way to neurotic angst. But run away is what I do. So it's only the odd things in Dickens that please me, like *Pickwick*, and *Edwin Drood*. And, to speak of a different kind of book altogether, isn't this the very thing that appals us or at least disappoints us at the end of *War and Peace*, when Pierre is

resorbed into the family, becomes the family, and we see him last in that idle comfort?

The trouble with offering the list I produced a while back is of course that it is all too easy to read it as prescriptive rather than descriptive, and that's not it at all. Don't think that I'm saying (to take an extreme case) that P.G.Wodehouse is a greater writer than Balzac. What I am saying is that Wodehouse landed in my lap when I was young and growing and eager, and taught me things I still admire him for. Balzac didn't. I'm describing my own course of essentially auto-didact, loner in the library, kind of growth – not evaluating. I'm offering my gratitudes, not trying to rank writers. So (if you asked me) I would probably say that Henry James is of the same rare and almost inconceivable rightness and permanence as Proust and Kafka and Dostoevsky. I just didn't happen to read him then, as I was growing. (I did mention him, I think, as one of the great ones I came to very late. And now he's worth so much to me – even the littlest things, the little landscapes we share. Thank God there are still things, even the greatest things, left to discover.)

**TMR:** Habent sua fata libelli. What is your approach to the editing process? Have you ever found it difficult to let a poem or book be called “finished”?

**RK:** Little books have their own destiny. There's a pun somewhere in the Latin, since I understand fate as coming from *fatum*, the past participle of the old verb *fare*, to speak. So fate is what has been spoken. The text (which is a weaving) has been spoken and becomes something on paper, on a scroll. . Writing has been confused since the beginning! The little book goes off into the world. I take the diminutive (*libelli*, rather than the ordinary *libri*) to be an almost affectionate nod at the little book bravely setting forth in the world. But it's a little Pinocchio, isn't it, telling lies till it learns to tell the truth. Anyhow, forgive this fantasia on *libelli*. Your question is really the most interesting way into the relationship between the poet and the poem. Now I'll just be speaking for myself, God knows I don't want to lay down any suggestions or commands. But I find writing and editing like the systole and diastole of our blood pressure, the rhythm that marks us alive, or the forward and back of the blood cells you can see under microscope as they surge through the capillaries. I love the editing process. Sometimes I think I write in order to have something to revise.

The main act of revision is to try to efface as much as I can the traces of my own preoccupations whenever they threaten to

mislead the poem, lead it into places where my desires or fears are rampant. The most obvious signposts ('fingerposts') of that misleading are the personal pronouns, but there are many other ways in which the poet can subvert the poem into a personal remark, turn a visionary gleam into a common love letter. That sounds censorious, and I don't mean it to. I love love letters too. But there's something the poem has to say that I must get out of the way of. And that getting out of the way is the essence of revision.

Then the accidents of revision: grammatical complexity, clarity, brevity, those are lovely issues, but everybody knows about them, though everybody has different valuations.

So this revisory process is the first 'fate' which the little book has – it compels me to attend to it, and shape it as best I can. But after that, the usual meaning of the quotation takes over: the poem goes out in the world and means what it means. Not what I mean it to. The parent wants the child to become a doctor, the child becomes a poet instead. Or as well. Or runs away to sea. Same with a poem. Nobody can say what a poem will do.

Or into whose hands it will fall, and with what consequences. Hitler listening to Parsifal hears what no Wagner ever put there, yet somehow it feels faintly right to blame Wagner for what the listener's madness let him find there. The poem has of course a life of its own, and all that exciting old post-structuralist vanishing of the author is a modern take on the Latin maxim, though the Latin I think surely was first meant as a kind of warning, of the uses and misuses of the written text. *Littera scripta manet*, they also said – and they said it with the anxiety of lawyerly admonition, not delight in the permanence of prose. Be careful what you write down. It becomes evidence.

So one of the problems –personal, political, moral, theological – of being a poet is to be held, rightly held, responsible for what the poem 'says' to and does with its readers on its journey, and yet also to free oneself from an attachment to the text. The ocean of meaning too often becomes an academic birdbath. I suppose little birds have to be clean.

The poem, then, in that sense of leaving me and going off into the world of other people and other times, is never finished. And it still is malleable: when we take Shakespeare's "paint the lily, and gild refinèd gold" and turn it into 'gilding the lily,' as we do, as we

have done, we have actually turned two conventional tropes, that might have seemed humdrum to the groundling, and turned them into a vivid, surrealist image. (By now it's worn out with use, but that's another part of this story.) This "we" I speak of it important – this is the whole world, every reader as reviser. Or truly: the reader as writer. So the one we call Homer came to be, of many mainland and island voices mumbling the stories and the verses till they got it right. I love revision, as I admitted earlier, and I'm afraid I do not always keep my hands to myself. Wouldn't it be lovely to have a Norton Anthology of Revised Great English Poems? We can all improve on perfection.

But I'm wandering a little from your question. Speaking of my own practice, I don't think any poem or text of mine is ever finished. Usually I write poetry longhand, and soon enough type it up into a file – I keep my work chronologically, it's all I have in the way of history, so it helps me that way too. When it's typed and printed out, I'll read or re-read it. And usually I won't let it be published for half a year or more, to be sure. To keep hearing it and seeing to it that the text on paper gives the not-me reader a sound like the sound I hear, that is, to get the notation right. To make things clearer, to get some of the yammering Pronoun family out. Those kids drive me crazy.

Even when the poem is printed at last, I think of it as on loan to the book. As long as I can think of something to do to it, I feel free. So when I put together my selected poems ten years or so ago, I felt free to revise poems from thirty years before, sometimes substantially. In the same way, when I give readings, I have gotten to enjoy pouring the poem into the moment – often I don't even read the whole poem, and take some pleasure in violating, some might say spoiling, the Aristotelian organic whole I had worked so hard to fashion. I don't know. I do what I want till I die – what else should I do? The poem I write is a poem I inherit from space, and I only give it time as it passes through me – and why should I ever deny it that passage, onward?

[You know, this is a very strange interview. I love the interview form, or format – which is it? Usually I'm interviewed by someone I've never met. Being interviewed is a way of knowing them, and it's important to know to whom you're talking. Otherwise I'll just rattle on, me-on-me like white-on-white. So it's very important to talk to the interviewer herself (so often it is a woman – what is the relationship between woman and interview? Every interviewer is I think Athena in disguise, and every



interviewee a species of Odysseus, lying his way into what he fondly imagines is her confidence.)

So that is why when I am ‘giving’ an interview, I find myself talking to the interviewer’s clothes, jewelry, wristwatch, smell, colors worn, her name, the place she comes from. All of them are clues to the identity-she-offers to my words, and I have to deal with them all. Sometimes interviewers complain at the end that they’ve talked more about themselves than about me; that’s not wrong, is it? They’re just as interesting as I am. And for the reader of the interview the words pass freely.

That’s why it’s so interesting that you send me a CD of the music you wanted me to hear. That music will be the scent of you then, your colors, what I’ll be half-conscious of as I speak, the senses always and forever guiding the sense.]

**TMR:** Do you think it’s important for a poet to give readings? Is there a particular reading (yours or another’s) that stands out most in your memory?

**RK:** Yes, very much so for me. It’s not until I read the poem aloud, in the presence of strangers, that I really begin to see what it

is and how it works. Reading aloud, even to a private party but all the more so in public, is the best engine of revision I know. So it's important for me, in the act and aftermath of composition. If I were a film maker, I would call public reading the 'post-production' phase of the work. I learn so much as I read, alert (after all these years of experience) to the mood of the audience, the look on that one face, whoever it might be, I tend to stare at frequently as I read, taking his or her reaction as fiduciary, a sea-mark for my journey.

I've given so many readings, many of them recorded but who knows where. I did like a lot a reading I gave just a month or two ago in New York, at the Bowery Poetry Club, Bob Holman's wonderful venue for the experimental and the radical. That reading (Elizabeth Robinson read on the same program, recent serene intricate work) is online, I think, as an mp3 file from Al Filreis's poetry archive at Penn.

Of readings I've heard: the most overwhelming was Creeley's NY reading at the Living Theater, maybe 1959 or 1960. More than any I'd ever heard, it showed the voice discovering language, language discovering music. It wasn't a performance but an alchemical demonstration. It probably, he probably, taught more of us the

wield of the line, the simplest, barest wielding of silence, than anyone else.

Other great readings: Amiri Baraka (still Le Roi Jones at the time) reading from *The System of Dante's Hell* at Bard around 1965.

John Wieners giving a long, sustained reading in an earth-floored cellar of Ed Budowski's bookshop in Buffalo, summer 1964. A series of eight or ten readings Robert Duncan gave to a small audience in October 1982 when he was teaching at Bard – he read all his recent work, all of *Ground Work*, all of *Circulations*.

Charles Olson reading from late Maximus poems in his kitchen in Gloucester, summer of 1963. Helen Adam in Rhinebeck 1977.

Dylan Thomas at CCNY in 1953 – half of the program he read Yeats – “The Circus Animals' Desertion,” and “Lapis Lazuli,” which I had never heard before – so it is a gift from Thomas.

Second half was his own poems, *Sir John's Hill*, *My Thirtieth Year* – I still hear him clearly. Louis Zukofsky reading his new Catullus translations from his little pocket spiral notebook as we sat in a luncheonette on Madison Avenue – or Zukofsky any time at all, his fantastic reading of A-13, and the Job lamentations for Kennedy from A-15. There are so many great readers, but these are events you ask about, so I offer the ones that stay in mind as touchstones of sounding poetry to an audience large or small.

**TMR:** Of the many books you have written, which is most important to you? Why?

**RK:** If you had said ‘which are most’ important, I could have given some sort of honest answer. So I’ll pretend you did, and weren’t asking for the unicum, the one and only. These are the ones that stand out:

Armed Descent, the first, the setting out of the measure.

Lunes, as floating a new form I ‘invented’

The Scorpions, the first extended fiction that worked for me

Axon Dendron Tree, the first extended poem that broke away from rhetoric by a stricter attention than I had known how to pay

Finding the Measure, my first Black Sparrow book in that 35 year relationship with John Martin, and a sort of first widely published chrestomathy of what I was up to

Cities, where so many of my preoccupations about time and history compacted into one neat little narration, no longer than a novella

A Line of Sight, a prose fantasia I still read from still learn from

The Loom, my discovery of how continuous narrative can grow out of lyric observation – the ‘tale’ as child of the poem. It was also my personal breakthrough – begun just after my 36th birthday told me I had succeeded in living past the dead-by-35 that doctors (well-meaning, and perhaps well-doing) had prophesied for me. It was the sense of having come through that released the energy of that continuous outflow of the poem

Sentence, if I had to pick one poem only, it would be this 256 line hypersyntactic sequence

Under Words, the most language-driven of my collections

A Transparent Tree, my first collection of short fiction, just because it is the first, and has ‘The Guest’ in it.

The Flowers of Unceasing Coincidence, my rebirth into writing after the great silence that India hollowed out in me

Ariadne, a poem as examination of a single mytheme – one immensely important to me, linked with my wife, Charlotte

Mont Blanc, my first real collaboration, and I suppose my favorite book – I always find things in it I don't remember, or don't understand.

The Garden of Distances, a real collaboration with the visual

Lapis, the first collection after five years of other things.

So there's 15 or 16 of them, and they all represent avenues or stretches of my work, none of them much like the others. And that is probably why I'm setting them out for you here, samples of what I do. And then there was The Cruise of the Pnyx, an actual narrative poem (my only one per se) which is online from Ubuweb, so easy to find. That experimented with three different registers of language for ways or levels of telling. And Scham/Shame, new hence still exciting to me. And Threads about to come out... And this new book I'm working on, almost finished, for the Parsifal

Press, bless them. Is it called May Day? Maybe. Which backwards is Yad Yam, or Hand/Sea. Happy Passover! And the long poem on the 'roots' and procedures of Proto-Language called Opening the Seals, finished but not revised...

By answering the question as I have, I think I've avoided the answer, If I tried to answer what poem is most important to me, it's the one I'm working on now, or will find somewhere between my hand and the notebook tomorrow morning. And the most important book is the one I'm making now. Whenever now comes around.

**TMR:** What are you working on now? What are your plans for the future, literary and otherwise?

**RK:** I can answer both of those questions, but I think the answers will be very different in kind.

First of all, what I'm working on now. I've mentioned that novel almost finished, *The Book from the Sky*, which I hope to have complete this summer. Unlike any other text I've ever worked on, it has not been written in long sustained sessions, but slowly, episodically, over five years. Even though the action of the novel

takes place within a few hours at one time, a few weeks at another. So the actual attention to the narrative, and the different styles called for in each section, has had the effect of letting me work on it only now and then – almost when the stars come right for the next phase. I shouldn't be so pompous about this – enough to say, it's taken a long time to write a short novel, but it feels right to me that it has done so.

I probably mentioned too the long sequence *Opening the Seals*. This is a cycle of attentions to the extraordinary work of the linguist Patrick C. Ryan, who has carried meta-historical linguistics even further than the great Nostratic theories of Greenberg and the Russians. Ryan has postulated a Proto-Language of all human speech, and has developed a magnificent, meticulous array of proto-syllables, that is, monosyllabic proto-morphemes, along with a powerful grid of proto-grammar to manipulate them. I've had enough standard linguistic training to view with interested or amused skepticism all the usual Original Language theories (they've been coming at us for hundreds of years). But there's something about Ryan's work which is *innately plausible*. That is, even if he is wrong about his main point, the historical priority of these syllabic meanings, he has gathered together some intensely rich *clusters of associated meanings*. (As



an example: ?a, that is glottalized a, generates meanings connected with: the forehead, the brow, the face, here, this, something near the speaker, connection, the tops of trees, foliage, the basic or nuclear family – all the extensions, in other words, of the brow, right here.) As I read through his catalogue of 90 monosyllables, I felt a visceral, overwhelming sense of conviction that he was onto something. Or that I had been given a gift. My poem then devotes one section to each of the ninety monosyllables. The text is completed, but waits revision.

A word about the title: the seals. My sense was that these syllables, these sounds were (by Ryan's proto-language premise) somehow engraved into human speech, that they were the seals we open when we speak. It is hard to learn to speak; children spend most of their first years working at that acquisition. My sense is that as they labor at learning, they press harder and harder on the seals, and dig them deeper into the rock of the mind. And my poem is nothing more than a presumptuous set of meditations on the syllables, one by one.

Two years ago in France I drafted a longish poem, not titled yet, as urgent for me as my *Mont Blanc* (which refers to the same region, though not written there). The poem is powered almost physically

by the strange region of the Chablais, between Lake Geneva and Mont Blanc, with its three north-rushing torrents, all called the Dranse (distinguished by some notable town through which each flows – so my Dranse is the Dranse de Morzine, while John Berger over in the next valley would belong to the Dranse d’Abondance), the region is wonderful for me. It was part of the old Kingdom of Savoy (once stretching from Geneva to Turin, holding the Alps in its hands), and full of strange valley dialects, part of France, and very French, and yet not French at all. I want to get that poem ready for the press.

Those are three projects that continue, but all are close to completion. The main project, the current on which my life is shaped, is the simplest of all, the writing of the day, the poem that comes, the work of the borderlands between sleep and waking, or in the brightness of everyday, between one thing and another, this and that. The poem is always the first-born of the between.

About the second question, about my plans: I feel it only fair, in honor of the patient attentiveness with which you’ve ‘listened’ to me, to be honest. This is hard to admit, because it comes close to some silence at the core of my strength. I have no plans. I never plan. I never plan anything. I follow whatever schedule is

proposed, go through my various academic adventures and inventions, go where I'm asked to travel, listen to what I want, and write what comes to mind. But I never plan. In fact I manage to think less about the future than any so-called adult I've ever known. I don't have plans, I have desires. That says it as clearly as I can.

**TMR:** What are your thoughts on where poetry stands, and, in your opinion, where is it headed?

**RK:** In the same way I never plan, I never try to foretell the future. I'm sure I see it, that we all see it, from time to time, with a clarity warped or clouded only by our mindset so fiercely determined on the 'arrow of time' running one way only. I'm sure we all see bits and pieces of the future, but know them not for what they are. Yet even knowing this, thinking this, doesn't make me any more clear-seeing than the next person. And I'm more likely to use the images or glimpses as starting points for poems. Cannibalizing the future. So I may wind up seeing even less than the normal person.

I think there are some things true about poetry right now that are interesting. Poetry now moves powerfully, dangerously, into the bare neurology of our condition.

Contemporary poetry seems to approach that Alzheimer-like condition where only the line you're in is real. "Language" poetry is the apt music from and for our time, born from and speaking to our challenged neurology. Autism at one end and Alzheimer's at the other. Ashbery speaks of his lines devouring one another, and when we listen to most contemporaries, at least the more radical workers I'm likely to go hear, each line seems to want to erase the line before it. And I tend to measure the success of a poem by how far it has traveled from its incipit.

So each age deserves the art it gets, obviously. Our own age, so overwhelmed in its attention, so fearful of loss of memory, with Alzheimer's Syndrome as the typically most feared fate, will naturally enough go for, be forced to go for, short-attention-span effects. To combat that a little, to give ourselves a chance for something more continuous. That would be my hope. The Continuity. Paul Blackburn's wonderful poem of that name a million years ago. The continuity – that's all we can hold onto. That's one reason I urge my students to the longest sustaining

attentions they can manage—not for esthetic principles, but for simple physical hygiene, like brushing their teeth. Listen to operas, listen to Bruckner, read War & Peace, study Pound's Cantos, go for the biggest systems, learn chemistry. Modernism began with the sense of 'shoring' fragments against our ruin. And now everything is fragment. So the angel we need is the energy of sustained alert continuity. But don't memorize anything. Memorizing destroys the moment.

So the poem now is of now – all the poem happens just in the happening – Clark Coolidge showed the way – line erases the line before. And one day I found I had written at the end of a poem: there is nothing to remember.

So there is nothing to predict – just bare luminosity – which is the charged notice of what's passing. Maybe that's the greatness we can aspire too – and it's not so very different from Dante's resolving, forever unresolved image: the yellow in the heart of the sempiternal rose. A thing is passing, and we are possessed by it utterly and are utterly clear in our apprehension of that moment. And then another thing is passing – and that's it – nothing but what happens now.

It's all about now – the “Now generation” is in fact the Alzheimer's generation. Of course we lose our memories – there is nothing to remember – only the loveliness of lines of poems going past – moments of pleasure – ads – soundbites – video highlights – a glimpse of her song – lies of politicians – and these lies turn true since they seem true when they're spoken and no one remembers. So this moment is my only argument.

If I'm to guess at a future, I'd think (do I mean hope? I really don't know) that poets might move exactly towards longer, or at least more continuous forms. Even now poetry seems at times to be more a part of the problem than of the solution. Poetry now is surely the least attended to, least 'successful' of the arts. And fiction, and memoirs –often of an intensely poetic, imagistic cast of mind – are very popular. Since the poem can't without a cognitive revolution even I wouldn't imagine possible rival the length and continuity of the novel form, perhaps poets will reach towards a kind of star-like, radiating continuity, something that makes the poem in front of you continuous with all your experience. Will that be 'simple' like Lorca? Will that be complex and chewy and tough like Vallejo or Pound? Will poems be stories again, like Chaucer? Maybe the Book of the Duchesse shows the way – the poem is a continuous consolation.

Well, I don't know what will happen. I know that the current fashion for generating poems from procedures and patterns is struggled against by a far more boring, but just as pattern-bound, knitting-obsessed school of thought, formalists they're sometimes called – but true form is organic, grows in the writing, not from formula. Somewhere in between those repetitive-motion addictions, the poem has to break through and out into the free. The deepest belief I have about poetry is that the form is emergent, and that the truest form, the comeliest form, is the form that arises from the sheer ardor of our attention to words as 'the tones given off by the heart,' in Pound's gorgeous if difficult phrase. That the poem comes from afar (from the furthest galaxies of language, it may be) but comes through us – and it must be true both to its origin and its utterance. Amen.

What does as practice seem to make sense now is, as I said above, to attend to long, thick, complicated processes, that demand sustained alertness, things that take time. And do things with the time taken. Attention Deficit Disorder is a disease of the culture, not of the kid. Colin Wilson in one of his books talks about the strange older mentor, unnamed, who make him a writer: forcing him to listen to long, long pieces of music and hold the whole

piece in mind, the shape and feel of the whole thing. I recall his crux was Furtwängler's Piano Concerto, a late Romantic exaltation that lasts over an hour. I don't think that's where poetry is heading, but I do think that heroic attention will help on the journey.

**TMR:** Do you think that contemporary poetry lacks the heroic?

**RK:** No. That's the one thing we do have. It is the real (rather than the formal) heritage of Modernism. The sense that the artist must do more than please patron or purchaser – the artist must accomplish some radical transformation in society (Pound, Lewis, Mayakofsky, Brecht) or in consciousness (Proust, Rilke, Mandelshtam) or in language itself, the substrate of society and consciousness both (Stein, Joyce).

And we still, however modest our personal styles, we still inherit that heroic, let me call it even operatic stance. (Wagner with his sense of the Gesamtkunstwerk and Liszt with his last works researching into silence, fragmentation – they stand behind Modernism in the sense that Modernism stands behind us.) It isn't long before even Minimalism brought forth immense operas from Philip Glass or Robert Wilson. Proto-minimalist Satie, fiercely



anti-Wagnerian, nonetheless writes *Vexations*, which takes many hours to perform – fighting fire with fire. In our society, even Minimalism has to be Huge.

I'm not sure how I feel about that – generally positive. The seventeen hours of *The Ring of the Nibelung* – maybe they're the Eleusinian Mysteries of the Late European epoch, we still are decoding their stances, their silences. (I'm listening to *The Valkyrie* as I write, on a webcast from Denmark. The Earth herself is singing, Act II.))

Struggling against the Vietnam War, the Balkan atrocities, the invasion and suppression of Iraq – such struggle has come to seem natural for all artists now, thank god, and we are used to seeing poets taking their noisy if cautious stations near the barricades. (Yet we still have official Poets Laureate of certain governments -- they are certainly not heroic, those voices of infamy.)

Remember Borges' map that grew to be the same size as the territory it represented. That is what we want of the art work of the future – a work of art coterminous with our experience of living. So I want everybody to be an artist. When poetry comes to be written by everyone, everyone, and when even dreamtime and

dreamspace can be carved by the will to art. That is the heroic. That is why we do what we do, making our little corner of reality into something fully as big as itself – or maybe a little bit bigger.

**TMR:** Could you give any advice to young poets, perhaps concerning attitudes or habits, by which they might cultivate their own art? Are there any up-and-coming poets whose work you like?

**RK:** I'd tell them what I tell myself:

Write every day. Start with whatever comes into your mind. Begin anywhere. Don't tell any story you don't have to tell. But do tell any story that starts telling itself from the images or words under hand.

Learn languages – not for high literary purposes (like reading Aeschylus in the original – though that is very great) but just to shake up your own language mind: so that. So that every speaking moment is a re-negotiation of space and terms between you and your 'native language.' Learn languages for the sake of confusion. For the sake of the other music.

The danger of this --or any method-- is fluency. Learn to stammer. Creeley revived/revised American lyric poetry by learning to stammer.

Get the syntax right and the words fall into place by themselves. Grammar is where the meaning means.

Lyric poetry is sacred to Erato. It is love poetry. Love poetry is not just about you and me and him and her. Love is not just about wanting or remembering. It is about being in pleasure. The eros of poetry is the embodiment of desire – the text as present pleasure. Presence of pleasure.

What helps me is all the books I've read. I don't have to write them again. I love grammars and histories and annals and etymologies and case histories and theological speculations and folklore and the encyclopedia and catalogues – they help me. Such studies help locate the moment of utterance as kiss – when your own mouth says somebody else's word. And all the words belong to the other.

Poetry is about generosity, it seems, and the two qualities I most recommend (what presumption!) to poets are generosity and

reverence. Generosity: give whatever you've got, keep talking, spit it out. Make it up. Give back to the world. (Olson said: if you want to be a poet, start out feeding sugar cubes to horses).

Reverence: towards every thing and every difference. Reverence towards the small. Toleration of the great. Kindness towards the rich and the celebrated. Abstain from bitterness – bitterness has killed more poets than neglect and poverty combined.

I'm so happy when I look up and see so much good work being done in America, so many young poets. And when I say young poets, I don't just mean the brilliant ones in their twenties and thirties, but all the voices that are still fresh with the excited puberty of language and image, process and formal invention. In the sense I mean, the late Jackson Mac Low was a young poet into his eighties, Thomas Meyer is a young poet in his sixties. I'm not trying to dodge your question. But there are so many poets whose work I like, whether up and coming, or there all along and I'm just noticing – the only history I could give is a history of my own attentions. And I have attended to, learned from, so many. I mean that the poets who excite me most are the ones I can learn from – and the young have much to teach. But I don't want to write down their names. Or rather I do want to, very much, but I'm so afraid

I'll leave someone out. So I'd rather have them all a little mad at me than just one of them very mad at me, and terribly hurt as well.

I'm lucky to have the specific richness of a lot of poetic talent around me – faculty, student, staff – here at Bard, a place that seems sometimes to have a strange Muse/ical poetic draw – year after year great people come here, and their work, which I sometimes can guide or help, also sustains me.

The way the powerful continuity of North American poetry since about 1950 sustains us all. What a time it's been!

One thing I do notice is that I tend to like best the work of those poets who like poetry – not necessarily mine. Sometimes you can hear in a poet the resonance of her affections – not at all 'influence' or derivation, I don't mean that, but a kind of profound depth from which her own work speaks, a depth discovered and excavated by all the generations of poets and all the practitioners of the moment. And in the sonorous shadows of our old masters – Rilke and Mallarmé and Pound and Stein and Olson and Duncan and O'Hara – and the young masters who are all around us now, we have a chance to live in poetry. Fulfilling maybe the great

mysterious maxim of Hölderlin, of Heidegger thereafter, poetic we dwell.

**TMR:** So, to end on a more serious matter: if we find ourselves at a dinner party with Robert Kelly, what can we expect?

**RK:** He'd sit, eating placidly, somewhat indifferent to his food, till the cheese plate arrived. Unless of course lamb was on the menu, or Korean beef, or cod or hake or haddock... Then local enthusiasm. He would hope for good coffee, and usually be disappointed. But he bears such trials since at home he's been drinking it all day. So he can endure the meek industrial brown fluid that they'll serve him even in otherwise conscientious places. He will complain about the coffee, if the meal is in a restaurant, and it will be the only complaint he permits himself. Food is food, but coffee is a friend.

And so is tea. In fact, you'd be much more likely to find yourself with him and his wife at teatime, which strikes them as the best meal for meeting – strong tea (Darjeeling, Assam, or Upton's Scottish) and two kinds of cake. He likes seeing people in

daylight, at the end of the day, nibbling and talking, so the food doesn't get in the way of the talk.

All through any meal, though, he'd talk a lot, incessantly, unless he can coax you into talking. He loves people who run the mouth, as we say, because then he can listen – listen to their words and think about their meanings (physical, mental, spiritual) and what they truly want, their Lacanian *désir* usually so ill-expressed by their conscious statements, and listen also to his own words rabbiting around inside him, answering them in himself and also answering themselves. A concert of voices it is to hear a person speak. He loves that. Yet he has this habit of deliberately taking people at their word. It's the safest thing to do, if not very adventurous. It is impolite to answer their *désir* when they're talking of something they think different, and seldom will he do so, unless moved by his own.

Dinner party, you say. Well, he'd try not to be there, Dinner is a sacrament, not a scrimmage. Best is a dinner of two, three, or four. Any more than that and angels would need to work hard to keep his interest. He'll either orate, arm raised and spectacles gleaming, or else sulk and think about far off things.

He has certain eccentricities. He doesn't drink alcohol, which makes him a death-head at the feast. He dislikes water unless it's carbonated – pétillante, say the naughty French. He doesn't like leaving wherever he is, so he will sit a long time at table, wearing out his interlocutors, and the poor waitress already late for her date.

What will he talk about? He'll talk about you. 'Whoever you are,' in Whitman's great tell-tale phrase. Despite the evidence of the endless pages of which these must be close to the last, he will not talk about himself. He will try to move the subject into your area of expertise, to learn. He will often lecture excitedly on theories that came just that second into his head in response to something you said. In response. Everything good that ever comes into his head comes in response. Thank you, he'll always be saying thank you. Thank you for asking. Thank you for making something happen in his head.

He will try to thank you to by getting you interested in things that have nurtured him, books and music and divine revelations and magical places and images – if he thinks about it, he'd admit that he does this in a kind of benign (he hopes) triangulation: two people –you and he—listening say to the same opera are by that



very fact close to, in touch with, listening to, each other. He calls this his doctrine of the Tertium, the third thing, and he thinks that any two people need that third thing as well to bounce their rubber ball off, the enemy in common, the friend they both admire. But look, there he's lecturing again already.

He'll realize that and look up at you, the real you this time, you, Simone, Pietro, across the table, in real time, and congratulate you for having avoided, all through the interview, the three subjects that everybody talks about, Sex, Money and Religion. Bless you. He has all too much to say about these subjects, just as everyone has, and he is just as boring as everyone else when he speaks of them.

Instead of money though, he might begin to talk about his own poetry, since Mercury is the god of merchants and exchange, discourse and communication, giving of gifts. He has been thinking lately about the whole shape of his own work. Will you listen to me also if I say it simply? That is the question his work has been asking all these years, as he's tried, reluctantly, dragging his feet, to work away from Greek and Latin and German and Anglo-Saxon to reach the word he means to say, and find, what would he find? The simple word he means to say? Daring to be

simple – would he lose the dearest hidden friend who looks at him from so many faces, the friend he presumes to call ‘you?’ Or would the friend stay, and stay him? In recent years, the words in his poems have grown shorter and simpler – sometimes he looks up at a piece he’s just been working on and rejoices to see that all the words are monosyllables. He loves that, the risk of it. One syllable to say the unsayable.

Instead of sex he’ll talk about conspiracies and secret societies, of which he in general approves. Conspiracies after all (the word originally means breathing close together) are just the sex gossip of history. He is immensely fond of conspiracy theories, though not much in the who-really-killed-whom kind. He really loves alternate timelines, the chronological revisionists (almost unknown in America, but very exciting: Fomenko, Vinci on Homer, Heribert Illig...), revisionist explanations of anything – anything that breaks the mind’s doubt, and sets it free to play in itself with what it finds. Anything that feels new.

The problem with him is that he’ll always say the first thing that comes into his mind.

Thank you.