

*H. L. Hix*

## TRAINING FOR POETS

The poet's concern must be, as always, self-discipline toward a formal  
integration of experience.  
—Hart Crane

Make ready for your gifts. Prepare. Prepare.  
—Theodore Roethke

Critical discussion among poets suffers a void, especially notable now that American poetry pivots around M.F.A. programs, sites that so tightly suture poetry production to pedagogy. So little has been written about *training* for the writing of poetry that the very idea hardly exists within contemporary poetry culture.

I know no critical deficiency more glaring. Although most major general-interest periodicals ignore poetry, and many literary journals run only palaverous reviews, a reader willing to seek out serious, perceptive assessments of new collections still can find plenty; although much recent theorizing seems jejune, a writer seeking to satisfy her thirst for theory can find ample sustenance; even in these difficult financial times for university presses, a reader interested in practical criticism of contemporary poetry can mine from rich veins; and a practicing poet need not look far for advice about the act of poetic creation, the process of publication, or the task of teaching in a workshop context. But there waits no equivalent wealth of work about what—when the workshop ends—continues to prepare one for poetic creation: the training of the poet.

Since the tempest in the teaching teacup rages, I should clarify that by “training” I do not refer here to pedagogy. Instead, I mean to designate an ongoing process, as we would use the word to ask an athlete how her training was going, rather than a once-for-all process, as we would use the word to ask a doctor where he got his training. The training to which I refer resists the passive voice: grammar sanctions saying either that a doctor trained at Stanford or that he *received* his training there, but only sanctions saying of an Olympic

champion that she trained in Boulder. Once-for-all training of the sort that leads to credentialing may have lasting benefits for poets, as it surely does for doctors: at the least, an earned M.D. from Johns Hopkins attests to having mastered a sizable body of basic knowledge about human physiology and nosology, and an M.F.A. from Iowa attests to the approbation of a group of established writers, themselves credentialed, whose judgment has currency among poetry writers and readers. Still, without the awareness that once-for-all training does not suffice, we would not laugh at the *New Yorker* cartoon that depicts a doctor in his office, degrees displayed prominently on the wall behind him, telling a visibly concerned couple, “No, I haven’t performed the procedure myself, but I’ve seen it done successfully on ‘E.R.’ and ‘Chicago Hope.’” When I visit my H.M.O., I want to know that the doctor (or, more likely, nurse practitioner) assigned me today earned respectable credentials at some point in the past, but also that she or he has stayed up to date since. In poetry, though, no body of literature debates practices parallel to those that keep a doctor current.

Talk about the act or process of writing itself will not fill this void. Just as watching Pete Sampras’ video on tennis technique will not help me turn pro if I am soft from years of exerting my service arm for nothing more vigorous than turning the pages of trade paperbacks and lifting mugs of lukewarm coffee, so learning from *The Triggering Town* that Richard Hugo wrote with a #2 pencil and crossed out “rapidly and violently” in preference to erasing may help my writing, but not much. Such knowledge of technique will not further my work if I am poetically “soft.” I need training: I want to know what Richard Hugo did to prepare himself even to pick up a pencil.

No doubt the absence of ongoing dialogue about training results in part from the lingering stereotype of the bohemian artist, whose vision derives from the posture of rebellion. But the deliquescence of the avant-garde, for all the reasons Octavio Paz so succinctly identifies in *The Other Voice*, reminds us of the other pole for the poet, opposite bohemian disdain: discipline. *Any* posture—rebellious or not—without discipline decays almost immediately into posturing: as a bunch like the Beats so plainly portrays. Reaffirmation of the importance of discipline to the practice of poetry will precede any constructive dialogue about training for poets.

If I assume an analogy with athletic training, I also pursue a parallel to the case Iris Murdoch makes in *The Sovereignty of Good* that “true vision occasions

right conduct,” though with the substitution of voice rather than virtue as my aim. Thus when Murdoch denies that freedom consists of “the sudden jumping of the isolated will in and out of an impersonal logical complex,” asserting instead that it results from “the progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly,” I want to apply her words to inspiration. Poetic inspiration occurs not upon the occasion of an unmotivated visit from a capricious muse, but as a function of the poet’s own progressive embodiment of an attitude toward language and the world. Murdoch aims her argument against existentialist ethics, and I aim mine in part against a common misconception, popularized by confessionalism but often assumed about all poetry: the equation of a miserable life with good poetry. Kant points out, contra empiricism, that “though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience.” Similarly, though the finest confessional poets lived tormented lives, it does not follow that their torment generated the great poetry. Millions of people have endured childhoods in the shadow of brutal father figures, but only one wrote “Daddy”; millions suffered manic depression before Prozac began mitigating its symptoms, yet only one wrote *The Dream Songs*. Plath and Berryman made great poetry beginning with their torment, but not all out of it. They wrote great poetry because they were prepared to do so.

Murdoch’s version of freedom and mine of inspiration share other similarities as well. Murdoch says, “I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of ‘see’ which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort.” Similarly, I argue, a poet can be inspired to write only what he has prepared himself to write, only what he can “see” because he has made the ongoing acts of readiness that give him the prerequisite clarity of vision.

Murdoch argues against choice as the fundamental moral action: “. . . at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. . . . The exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments. The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial.” Rather than exercising one’s will in freedom while at the mall, reaching as a result the conscious choice not to shoplift, one lives in between trips to the mall in

such a way that the need for that choice never arises. The good person, on Murdoch's view, does not repeatedly choose not to shoplift, but instead trains her attention in such a way that not shoplifting becomes a *fait accompli* before any occasion for choice arises. "Our ability to act well 'when the time comes' depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention," Murdoch says. "Freedom is not strictly the exercise of will, but rather the experience of accurate vision. . . . By the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act." So in poetry. Jared Carter writes better poetry than I do, not because at the moment of writing he consistently makes better choices of words to include in his poems (though that effect follows as a corollary), but because he has so highly elevated the quality of the habitual objects of his attention.

Virtue in Murdoch's argument adopts perfection as an aim; voice in mine, genius. Here the affinity between athletic training, Murdoch's argument, and my claim coalesces: all assume a neo-Aristotelian view about how to become what one is not. In all three cases, choice, the spontaneous enacting of one possibility in preference to other possibilities, diminishes in importance before decision, the construction of a deliberate fiction and its maintenance until it comes true. This fictionality opens the space not of deceit or self-deception, but of mimesis. If genius is not innate (and in so intertextual a realm as poetry, how could it be?), it must be acquired by imitation. Become a flutist by acting as if you were a flutist, not because you want to deceive others into thinking you already are a flutist, or because you suffer the delusion that you are already a flutist, but because you can get to be a flutist only by doing what flutists do; and so for poets.

There's the rub. What *do* poets do? Beyond the obvious (they write poems), nobody's talking. What, exactly, do good poets, or better yet great poets, do to become so good? Go to the A.W.P. conference? I think a more interesting, and more challenging, answer begs formulation. The following fragments toward an answer will serve, I hope, as points of discussion. They presuppose a view of poetry as a synthetic activity, one that creates a unified work out of disparate components.

I suggest therefore the following "curriculum" for a poet's training. As in any curriculum, breadth buttresses specialization, but imbalance is inevitable. The broader the base the better, but no one can major in everything without failing, like the perennial student, by substituting the study itself for the ob-

jective it should serve. Each “major” also constitutes an important aspect of poetic practice, and by its being emphasized or downplayed can help establish a poet’s voice, so I mention in each case a contemporary poet or poets whose work I see as emphasizing that aspect.

### EXTERNAL

A poet’s preparation begins with the extra-poetic, with “cross-training.” Total immersion in poetry would drown anyone.

To falsify Dana Gioia’s charge that “although American poetry sets out to talk about the world, it usually ends up talking about itself,” poets will have to fulfill this imperative from George Oppen’s daybook: “It is necessary to have some stance outside of Literature: it is necessary to be disconnected with literature.” Oppen may have had in mind specifically a political stance, but I construe “stance” more broadly. Each poet must establish her stance, define her disconnection, as she sees fit, whether through political engagement, study of another field, employment in a capacity unrelated to poetry, or in some other way.

This category does not parallel those that follow. In many cases, adoption of “a stance outside of Literature” happens by necessity (in employment, for instance) or without conscious decision (as when someone comes to poetry after a formative experience like involvement in a war). Also, training in one of the other categories may itself produce or relate to one’s “stance outside of Literature.” Still, the caveat that one must bring to poetry something other than poetry demands statement, and acquiring or developing that stance will constitute an important part of any poet’s training. Study philosophy. Tend bar. Become a doctor or engineer. Serve in the Peace Corps. Hike the Appalachian Trail. Besides the familiar bank clerks, insurance executives, and doctors from the modernist canon, I know, or know of, poets whose “stance outside of Literature” derives from current or former careers as musicians, schoolteachers, plumbers, farmers, and housecleaners, as well as poets who teach creative writing for a living but who create a stance from active engagement in mountaineering, horse training, political activism, and so on.

Again, this category does not parallel those that follow, so perhaps any good poet (other than a Stevens whose every poem seems an *ars poetica*) would serve as an example of emphasis on the “external,” but in a poetry world still beholden to the old New Critics and still most comfortable accept-

ing as “poetic” the concerns of white males, poets like Adrienne Rich and Marilyn Nelson stand out as poets whose work foregrounds what I am calling the “external.” Without neglecting other poetic concerns (the sound of the language, the relation to poetic tradition, and so on), each subordinates those concerns to the service of the pre-poetic “content” of the poems: in Rich, validation of the experiences and the rights of women in general and lesbians in particular, and in Nelson, exploration of the experience of being an African American woman. When emphasis on the external fails (as so often in devotional poetry, for example), poetry becomes merely didactic; when it succeeds (as so often in Rich and Nelson), it reorients a reader toward some neglected portion of his own experience, or alerts the reader to ways in which another person’s experience differs from his own, fulfilling the most catholic version of the ideal implicit in Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that “There is a whole region of human experience which the male deliberately chooses to ignore because he fails to *think* it: this experience woman *lives*.”

## VERBAL

In addition to having something besides poetry to write poems about, a poet needs the verbal facility to write them well. Indeed, the two capacities cannot be separated. In Nietzsche’s formulation, “We always express our thoughts with the words that lie to hand. Or, to express my whole suspicion: we have at any moment only the thought for which we have to hand the words.” No one will need convincing on this point: from the monthly installment of “Increase Your Word Power” in *Reader’s Digest* to ads in business magazines promising career success through expansion of vocabulary, we see repeated acknowledgment throughout society of the general importance of verbal skills. Nor, within the particular practice of poetry, does anyone construe as accidental the correlation between Shakespeare’s rich vocabulary and the richness of his plays.

Most poets enjoy unusual verbal fluency already, or they would not have entertained the ambition of becoming a poet, and much of the method for further enrichment is self-evident: read a lot and write a lot. Still, two practices seem especially important to verbal training. First, the study of languages other than English (or other than one’s native tongue). Study of languages closely related to English, like the classical and romance languages, underscores grammatical and etymological understanding of English. In languages more distantly related to English, the underscoring of grammatical under-

standing occurs through contrast, and a glimpse at the absence of precise correlatives for words and locutions from another language heightens sensitivity to nuance in English. Until the middle of this century, most of the now-canonical poets in the Anglo-American tradition (those “English poets who grew up on Greek”) learned at least Latin in youth, and most of the contemporary poets I know speak or read at least one other language.

Secondly, simple enlargement of English vocabulary. Dip into the dictionary daily. Note unfamiliar words as you read, and prepare small note cards for each: write the new word on one side of the card, and on the other side write its definitions along with an example sentence, preferably the one in which you first saw the word. Periodic review helps a word stay in mind until either another encounter with it or some occasion for its use plants it firmly in mind. Whatever the method, enlarging vocabulary serves a poet’s development: only from a broad palette can one hope to produce the precise shades of meaning poetry demands.

So-called “language poetry” got its name (obviously) from emphasizing this aspect of poetry, but any work written on the basis of an attempt to liberate the generative powers of language by diminishing the intentional and expressive role of the author (in favor of the language’s own “expression” of “intention”) would exemplify this characteristic. Rule-bound texts like John Cage’s mesostics feature the verbal over the other aspects of poetry, as do “intertextual” works like Rosmarie Waldrop’s *The Reproduction of Profiles*. Heather McHugh and S. X. Rosenstock, whose work abounds in puns and word-play, demonstrate a different way of featuring language above other aspects of poetry. Such poetry fails when its language becomes merely a private language and functions, like role-playing games, to draw the imagination farther and farther into an isolated world. It succeeds when it fulfills Gadamer’s directive that “the proper function of the poet is a shared saying, a saying that possesses absolute reality simply by virtue of its being said,” and therefore embodies Wittgenstein’s maxim that “What looks as if it *had* to exist, is part of the language”; when, in other words, it reveals things that not only *do* exist but *must* exist.

## MUSICAL

Certainly music bears a different relation to poetry than do words, though a no less integral one. The intensity of poetic language cannot be separated from its musicality. “Can anything be more remarkable than this,” Wittgenstein

asks, "that the *rhythm* of a sentence should be important for exact understanding of it?" Many musical elements—rhythm, harmony, tone, melody, etc.—cross over either literally or metaphorically into poetry.

But isn't it *musicality*, one might ask, that matters in poetry, rather than music per se? Besides, since society surrounds us with music, in grocery stores and waiting rooms, at the movies and on the bus, in our cars and in our homes, why would a poet need special musical training? Of course a poet does need musicality to compose in a voice so canorous as Bogan or Bishop, Hopkins or Hecht, and one can acquire musicality by listening to language: recite enough Keats, and soon your sentences, too, will sing. Still, music remains the root of musicality, and training in the former should enhance the latter. Dickinson made hay out of humming old hymns, but imagine the range a broader repertoire could have handed her. As for our being deluged with music, we are, but in the role of passive receptors, and to such a degree that we learn to shut the music out. Most of us very seldom function as *active* listeners to, or better as *makers of*, music, and only when we assume those roles can we indenture music into our service as poets.

Bruce Bond, Kate Light, Donald Justice, and Jan Zwicky, who have extensive professional training in music and who sometimes write poems on the subject of music, foreground musicality, but so do Eric Pankey's recent poems, the lush and melodic cadences of which draw on the riches of music as their greatest resource. Poetry that emphasizes musicality fails when it slips into Swinburnian sing-song divorced from sense, but succeeds when the emotive power of absolute music fills the language of the poem "up to the brim, and even above the brim."

## TRADITIONAL

"I am a traditionalist," James Wright says, "and I think that whatever we have in our lives that matters has to do with our discovering our true relation to the past." One need not share Wright's traditionalism, though, to recognize the importance of thorough knowledge of the tradition within which one writes. Even the most virulent anti-traditionalist needs a deep awareness of tradition. Adorno says, "One must have tradition in oneself, to hate it properly." Or, more mildly yet purposefully stated, to resist it effectively.

In advocating knowledge of tradition—the discovery, in Wright's words, of one's true relation to the past—I do not assume a narrow view of "the tradition." One of the important developments for poetry in the last thirty



years has been recognition that the history of poetry as the New Critics saw it, the history being narrated in classrooms as the Creative Writing M.F.A established itself, was *a* history of poetry, and that even though immersion in that tradition mattered, immersion in that tradition *alone* was highly confining. Not only must we acknowledge and understand the alternative traditions created all along by politically underserved groups like women and ethnic minorities, but also the alternative traditions as defined formally or by other criteria. Discovering the richest possible tradition for oneself, without blindly accepting a narrow or impoverished one handed down, becomes the mandate.

Memorize poems. Memorize many. One a week for twenty years is not too much. The concerns some parents and religious fundamentalists express about the pervasiveness of “adult themes” in movies, radio, television, and other media can be easily exaggerated, but they have a basis in fact: filling the mind of a child (or an adult) with violence and pornography will not by itself *cause* that child to commit violent or perverse acts, but it certainly would combine with any other influences to support inclinations in that direction. Similarly, I believe, memorizing a large body of fine poetry will not cause one to become an excellent poet, but will combine with any other training practices to support that ambition.

Any “neo-” movement defines itself by its relation to the past, so “New Formalism” stands as the most visible current expression of tradition as the central poetic element. Dana Gioia, for example, differentiates his work from others in part by adopting (explicitly in his criticism and implicitly in his poetry) previously unfashionable predecessors like Kees and Longfellow as his ancestors. A different approach that still foregrounds tradition can be found in Susan Wheeler’s work, with its more ironic method of borrowing. Traditionalist poetry fails when it merely follows models, repeating what preceded it, and succeeds when it restores to the repertoire of poetry some neglected power stored in form.

## PHYSICAL

Here the familiar adage, “mens sana in corpore sano,” holds now as always. Mental function cannot be severed from somatic: the effects on mental function of chemical alterations and circulatory problems have received ample documentation, and anyone can verify from personal experience how much more difficult concentration becomes during a bad cold or other illness, and

how much longer and more vigorously one can work during periods of good health. Even in that most paradigmatically cerebral sport, chess, the Soviet training system that dominated the world for years included ambitious physical exercise programs. Karpov looked clumsy on the tennis courts, but he spent a lot of time there, and always looked good at the chessboard afterward.

Because this facet of training seems *prima facie* farthest removed from the stereotyped poet in the garret, and because the history of great poetry brims with examples of poor physical specimens, from tubercular Keats to bingeing Berryman, I should insert here a disclaimer that applies to all the types of training in this essay. I do not assert that the degree of one's physical fitness bears some direct correlation with excellence in poetry: Jackie Joyner-Kersey can't trade her gold medals for Rita Dove's Pulitzer. I do allege that, *all else being equal*, physical fitness furthers the work of poetry by enhancing relevant qualities like concentration and endurance. Excellence in any one area of training will not by itself translate into excellence in poetry; discipline in all the areas, however, will accrue to the benefit of anyone's poetry.

So run, or ride a mountain bike, or take up basketball. Exercise need not stand alone in a physical training regimen for a poet, though, since fitness does not stand alone as a physical concern. Poetry is written by bodies and about bodies, so any practice that promotes coenesthesia will contribute, from yoga or t'ai chi to meditation or even—all work and no play makes a dull poet—sex.

Molly Peacock and Sharon Olds foreground the physical in their poetry, Peacock often and Olds almost always. One could not read the first section of Peacock's *Original Love*, for instance, without being reminded that the voice, whatever its relation to the mind, always and necessarily comes most immediately from the body. Preoccupation with the physical succeeds when it heightens self-awareness, helping the poet and reader place themselves in the world more precisely; it fails when it falls into fascination, when (replicating, in a different province, the failure of language poetry) it pulls the imagination into a privacy severed from reciprocity with the world (the body/bodies) outside the body.

## CHTHONIC

In addition to awareness of one's own body, awareness of the other bodies around us (animal, vegetable, and mineral) serves the poet, as Thoreau indi-

cates with his rhetorical questions, "Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" As population continues to migrate toward cities, and as culture becomes more and more exclusively produced in urban settings, this aspect of an individual poet's training increases in importance. As the proportion of our perceptual energies devoted to storefront and monitor and billboard rises, so do we more closely resemble the urban child who does not know that hamburgers come from cows. Even a city dweller needs to retain some awareness of those aspects of experience not specific to the city.

The pull toward gardening as a means of maintaining primal intimacy with the earth must be strong, since gardening remains the most popular pastime in the world, and since its beneficial effects on at-risk children, for instance, seem clear. But gardening hardly exhausts the options for chthonic connection: through their recent anthology, Joseph Duemer and Jim Simmerman have demonstrated how powerfully dogs can draw out one's reciprocity with the earth; Don Welch raises pigeons; W. S. Merwin cultivates plants native to his current home state.

Pattiann Rogers and Mary Oliver heavily emphasize the chthonic in their poetry. In Oliver's *American Primitive*, for example, nearly every poem takes as its subject some natural phenomenon ("Lightning," "First Snow," "Spring"), some plant or animal ("Mushrooms," "Moles," "Egrets"), or some human activity in a natural setting ("Tasting the Wild Grapes," "Crossing the Swamp"). Such poetry succeeds when it meets the Augustinian ideal, "He lives in justice and sanctity who is an unprejudiced assessor of the intrinsic value of things," and fails when it romanticizes nature. Romanticizing does two things wrong at once: it engages in the exploitation Jan Zwicky says "occurs when a thing . . . is used in the absence of a perception of what it is," and it flows from self-deception, specifically the denial of one's own complicated and ambiguous relation with the earth.

## CULTURAL

At the pole opposite the chthonic lies the cultural, the realm of specifically human construction, no less essential a part of any poet's awareness. Poetry and music obviously are cultural products, but I have made the "traditional" and "musical" into their own categories because of the peculiarly close relation each has to the practice of a poet, leaving "cultural" to function here as a catch-all for other forms of human production.

I argued in *Spirits Hovering Over the Ashes* that the twentieth century has witnessed a sea change in the most pervasive view of culture, from a diachronic perspective in which one defined oneself temporally, by relation to one's predecessors, to a synchronic perspective in which one defines oneself by relation to one's contemporaries. I argued there for a balance between the two views, neither of which stands complete in itself, and each of which depends for its efficacy on the presence of the other; I suggest here that within the specific realm of poetry the same need for balance holds. A poet needs to constantly increase her knowledge of and sensitivity to the cultural products of the past, and also to the breadth of contemporary cultural products. Read history and art history. Travel. Read beyond the body of mostly Euro-American white male writers on whose work most of us were fed in our formal education. Read more deeply into that body of writers. Surround yourself with artists or physicists instead of other poets.

Poets like Gjertrud Schnackenberg and Richard Howard typify an emphasis on the diachronic cultural, responding to earlier cultural artifacts; poets like Naomi Shihab Nye and David Mura typify an emphasis on the synchronic cultural, drawing out the importance of cultural context and the breadth of available culture beyond the Euro-American. Poetry that emphasizes the diachronic cultural succeeds when it illuminates its contemporary concerns by establishing their timelessness through connection with earlier culture, and fails when it falls into nostalgia or mere erudition. Poetry that emphasizes the synchronic cultural succeeds when it reveals the universality of private, "tribal" concerns, when in other words it makes possible a new cultural awareness to any party willing to engage it, and fails when it speaks only to those already attuned to its cultural domain.

## COMMUNAL

Writing poetry occurs not as an exclusively solitary occupation, but within various communities, including at least one built around poetry and at least one other that does not acknowledge the poetry being written and read within it. Part of the training of a poet consists in the fulfillment of his obligations to the community/communities within which he writes.

Fulfillment of one's obligation to the poetry community can occur in a variety of ways. Reviewing for a journal or teaching in an M.F.A. program would accomplish this end, as would editing and some forms of criticism.

Fulfillment of one's obligation to the broader community, the one that does not recognize or acknowledge the poetry being written within it, may be more difficult, because of the scope of the problem. As Charles Bernstein so succinctly formulated it, "What is to be regretted is not the lack of mass audience for any particular poet but the lack of poetic thinking as an activated potential for all people." Write criticism aimed at a general-interest audience rather than at an audience of those previously engaged in reading poetry, or go into the schools. Other enterprises like anthologizing might serve the same end: Naomi Nye's anthology work for children offers a good example. Those poets who have founded presses (New Directions, Ecco, Copper Canyon, Story Line, et al.) provide the most dramatic example of service to both communities simultaneously and substantially.

A vivid example of a body of work in which community stands as the central element is that of Carolyn Forché, not only in her own poetry, but also in her translation and anthologizing. "Communal" poetry succeeds when it awakens readers to the experiences of other community members, or generates in the reader a recognition of her membership in communities with which she had not previously identified, and so furthers the solidarity of humans; it fails when it makes mere melodrama of the circumstances and lives it depicts.

### CONCEPTUAL

Identifying the "conceptual" as a training component demonstrates again how little the categories can be separated. After all, elements like musicality might well be considered conceptual. Still, a realm exists, however much it may overlap with the preceding domains, that I would encapsulate with Vilhelm Ekelund's words: "Everything beautiful wants to tell you something. Everything beautiful wants to become thought."

Maintain a daybook or journal: the list is long of poets whose extensive journals underwrote their poems: George Oppen, Theodore Roethke, Sylvia Plath, et al. Even correspondence on a high level can advance this aim, as attested by the letters of Keats, Williams, Olson/Creeley, and others. To that list one might add criticism as well, particularly criticism with a theoretical rather than a practical bent.

Richard Kenney, Jorie Graham, and Robert Bringhurst emphasize the conceptual. Kenney's use of scientific terminology and ideas, Graham's particular

manner of appropriating the cultural (which seems to me to fit better here than into the “cultural” category above), and Bringham’s uses of the pre-Socratics and Eastern thought all pursue a “mystical rationality” not unlike that toward which some philosophers strive. Poetry that foregrounds the conceptual succeeds when it accomplishes the Kantian aim of synthetic a priori knowledge, and fails when it becomes idle speculation, the Wittgensteinian “wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it,” and which therefore “is not part of the mechanism.”

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Discipline not balanced by spontaneity and play and eccentricity and idleness produces anorexics and flagellants, not poets. I have exaggerated the emphasis on discipline in this essay because both the poetry community and the broader culture suffer from an aspect blindness in regard to poetry, a repression of the role of discipline. Religion suffers when either its practitioners or its opponents diminish the role discipline plays in it (when they treat it, for example, as primarily a social outlet or a self-help strategy), and so does poetry. This essay has been imbalanced *toward* discipline because prevailing views of poetry are imbalanced *away from* it, and a poetic practice (or any other life) with too *little* discipline sacrifices as much satisfaction as does a poetic practice with too much.

Nietzsche answers his own question “What is genius?” with two conditions: “To will an exalted end *and* the means to it.” The first condition every aspiring poet fulfills, but the second has been my concern here. To will the means to the exalted end of writing fine poetry, a poet must enact the Keatsian imperative to “inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress / Of every chord, and see what may be gain’d / By ear industrious, and attention meet.” Training that attends to the elements enumerated above will serve any poet, fostering in her or him a set of skills and awarenesses that can catalyze the writing process, and embodying a set of core values—consistency, self-discipline, and so on—that, though seldom dramatized as part of the image of the poet in our society, regularly present themselves in the character of the great poets who preceded us.