

Tupelo Press Writing Conferences

Bay Area, California

Being Whitmanesque. Further exploration of our poems through the lens of Walt Whitman and several important contemporaries: Tupelo Press Writing Conferences, Bay Area, California 2017

- **March 18 - 19, Portola Valley**
- **March 23 - 24, San Francisco**
- **March 25- 26, Berkeley**



Here we are, approximately seven weeks away from our Bay Area Poetry Conferences: a weekend in a gorgeous private home in Portola Valley, CA, a midweek session in the heart of San Francisco, one of the world's great cities, a weekend in storied Berkeley.

I'm so very excited about our upcoming work together!

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Here's our pre-conference information and assignments. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to email me (or Kirsten Miles). More particulars (housing, times, directions, etc.) about the conferences will follow in plenty of time. There's a LOT here to dig into. I hope you enjoy and learn from these ideas, exercises, and materials!



What We Will Do:

In addition to working with our own poems (you'll bring 8 copies of a packet of poems, but more specifics on that further down), we're going to learn how to learn from Whitman by figuring out what he's about, how he establishes his "voice," by figuring out what to take from WW and how to take it, and by studying other poets who seem to have learned their lessons well.

As there's almost no more productive method for making important leaps to the next level (or two) as a writer than having the experience of exploring the creative process, real-time, we will spend two full days doing just that.

Here's what-and-how to prepare so that you'll get the very most out of these two-day conference(s):

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Pre-Conference Assignments:

As I say, when we meet in the Bay Area, letting Walt Whitman be our spirit guide, we're going to focus on the wild and un-sprung, the "shaggy and unshorn."

We're going to give ourselves permission to permit our poems to throw off their nice manners and go rogue. The goal is to un-tame our instincts, to loosen the reins, to allow the thundering hooves of our own lines carry us, with nerve and verve, to places we're often too refined or too polite to go. It's about voice, and it's about soul (not the abstract thing, the "soul" that hovers over our heads and maybe out-lives us, but rather, I'm referring to the "soul" that lives at our most earthbound core, that works so hard, day-after-day, to make us who we might be. The little engine that could, if only we let it.

Please bring with you eight (8) identical packets, each one consisting of 6 of your own poems, and of those 6 poems, at least three should be from the exercises outlined below this very brief extract from a piece on Whitman by John Updike.

So, first, here's Updike on Whitman. Please think about it.

Walt Whitman: Ego and Art

John Updike

February 9, 1978 Issue

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"The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it": thus Walt Whitman's preface to *Leaves of Grass* concludes, and the twelve decades since this brave assertion was launched upon the air by an obscure Brooklyn journalist have given the proof. Whitman is not only the first name that comes to mind when we think of an American poet, but he has done what not even Shakespeare in his nation's literature achieved: he has appropriated to his own image the very idea of poetry.

Poetry is truth, he claims; it is facts and candor; poetry is free and unbuttoned and inclusive and fearless; its matter is "the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves"; it is "performance disdaining the trivial." Whitman wrenched from American poetry the possibility of its being a mere craft, and thrust upon it the duty to be celebration and prophecy, to be, no less, a verbal appropriation of the universe. Further, he thrust upon America the idea that it was, this crass green nation, poetic. "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States are essentially the greatest poem."

Such notions were not new with Whitman. Six years before the first publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Longfellow had a character in Kavanagh say, "We want a national literature altogether shaggy and unshorn, that shall shake the earth, like a herd of buffaloes thundering over the prairies." And eighteen years before, in addressing the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Cambridge, Emerson had employed a ringing recourse to the first person singular that might be Whitman's:

The world—the shadow of the soul, or other me, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself. I run eagerly into this resounding tumult. I grasp the hands of those next to me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech. I pierce its order; I dissipate its fear; I dispose of it within the circuit of my expanding life. So much only of life as I know by experience, so much of the wilderness have I vanquished and planted, or so far have I extended my being, my dominion.

As the peroration ends, Emerson throws out the challenge to the young scholars of his audience:

We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe.... If the single man plant himself indomitably on his instincts, and there abide, the huge world will come round to him.... A nation of men will for the first time exist....

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Ok, many thanks to John Updike. Now, on to your homework:

Below are some poems to read, ponder, and to inspire your own offspring (off-sprung) poems before we meet in the Bay Area:

May I suggest that you begin each day between now and when we meet in March, first by reading these essential poems from Whitman's Leaves of Grass:

Then, here's your homework (not, if the links don't work, please copy and past the URL into your browser):

1. First, concentrate on close readings of:

"Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Rocking," "
<http://www.bartleby.com/142/212.html>

As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life,"
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/51003>

"To the Man-of-War Bird,"
<http://www.bartleby.com/142/267.html>

"On the Beach at Night,"
<http://www.bartleby.com/142/267.html>

and,

"On the Beach at Night Alone."
<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/beach-night-alone>

To help you along, here are some good thoughts on "Out of the Cradle"
http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/whitman/cradle.htm

2. Write your own version of part or all of any of these poems of Whitman's, being both yourself and Whitman. Change the locations if you wish, change any part of the poem, but try to write in a Whitman-like voice. Really, trust me on this; this is all the explanation you need.

3. Then, read closely and with affection each of the contemporary poems I've linked to (or copied) below, starting with C.D. Wright's (which is, of course, at the end).

4. Finally, write your own versions of any two of these contemporary poems—meaning: write a new poem in a way that reflects the style, voice and essence. Chose poems that catch your mind's fancy, ones that feeds that inner soul-engine of yours, once that you can really climb inside.

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See if you can permit the “I” of your poems to become a Whitmanesque “eye” — In other words, let your poem’s regard—it’s gaze, it’s “I”— transcend the self, and become the portal for the essential stuff of the world that’s not you. This is what Emerson called “the transparent eyeball.”

The poems:

Mark Wunderlich: “Take Good Care of Yourself”

<http://www.everseradio.com/take-good-care-of-yourself-by-mark-wunderlich/>

Robin Costs Lewis: “Mother Church No. 3”

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/58756>

Nick Flynn: “If This is Your Final Destination”

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/58448>

Sherwin Bitsui: [What land have you from the blooded-out region of your face?]

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/53167>

Ada Limon: “What it Looks Like To Us and the Worlds We Use”

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/56379>

Paisley Rekdal: “Dear Lacuna, Dear Lard”

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/detail/42355>

Carolyn Forché: “Light of Sleep”

Light of Sleep

In the library of night, from the darkness of ink
on paper, there is a whispering heard book to book,
from Great Catastrophe and The World of Silence
to The Encyclopedia of Ephemera, a history having
to do with aerial leaflets, air raid papers,
bills of mortality, birth certificates and blotting papers,
child lost-and-found forms, donor cards, erratum slips,
execution broadsides “liberally spattered with errors of all kinds”
sold by vendors at public hangings, funeralia, with drawings
of skeletons digging graves and inviting us to accompany
the corpse of x to the church of y, gift coupons, greeting cards,
housekeeping accounts, ice-papers to place in windows
for the delivery of blocks of ice, jury papers, keepsakes,
lighthouse-dues slips for all ships entering or leaving ports,
marriage certificates, news bills, notices to quit, oaths, paper
dolls, plague papers, playing cards, quack advertisements,
ration papers, razor-blade wrappers, reward posters,
slave papers, songbooks, tax stamps, touring maps,

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union labels and vice cards left in telephone boxes,
warrants and watch-papers used to keep the movements
of the pocket watches under repair free of dust,
wills and testaments, xerography, yearbooks and the Zoetrope
disk also known as the wheel of life wherein figures painted
in a rotating drum are perceived to move, faster and faster
whether dancing, flying, or dying in the whirl of time.

Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil by C.D. Wright

(The following is an excerpt from Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil by C.D. Wright)

I believe in a hardheaded art, an unremitting, unrepentant practice of one's own faith in the word in one's own obstinate terms. I believe the word was made good from the start; it remains so to this second. I believe words are golden as goodness is golden. Even the humble word brush gives off a scratch of light. There is not much poetry from which I feel barred, whether it is arcane or open in the extreme. I attempt to run the gamut because I am pulled by the extremes. I believe the word used wrongly distorts the world. I hold to hard distinctions of right and wrong. Also I think the antithetical poetries can and should coexist without crippling one another. They not only serve to define their other to a much more exacting degree than would be possible in the absence of the one or the other; they insure the persistence of heterogeneous (albeit discouragingly small) constituencies. While I am not always equal to it, I appreciate the fray. I am neither too old for it nor too finished off. I am not sure of where it is I am going. Important, I believe, to resist finality in one's own work while assiduously working toward its completeness. Detrimental, I think, the dread of being passed on the left, as is the deluded and furthermore trivializing notion of one's own work being an advance over any thing or any one. Truthfulness is crucial. A continuous self-criticism is demanded of the effort without which only non-art gets made, that is, manufactured. "A poet would show little thought to say poetry is opposed to since it is added to like science," insisted Zukofsky. So do I, insist. Consequently I would contest those writers whose end if (reviling-all-the-way) to prevail.

Provisionally yours,

—From Cooling Time: An American Poetry Vigil by C.D. Wright. Copyright (c) 2005 C.D. Wright. Courtesy of Copper Canyon Press.

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I so very much look forward to working with you, poet-to-poet!

*See you in March,
Jeffrey Levine, Tupelo Press*