



May–June 1999

Bi-Monthly • Vol. 30, No. 5

Memory's Room

by Mary Carruthers

While the following article may be a little different than usual for this magazine, we were struck by the interesting possibilities it seemed to hold for the writer and writing teacher—*Editor*.

When asked to lead a tour of one of her favorite rooms at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Mary Carruthers, chair of the department of English at New York University and director of the Center for Research in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, chose the Liberal Arts Studiolo from the Ducal Palace at Gubbio, Italy. Designed and used by the Duke of Urbino, one of the leading intellectuals and military men of the Renaissance, this exquisite trapezoid room is fifteen by eleven feet wide, with an ornate, sixteen-foot-high ceiling of raised, jewel-like gilded octagons. The walls are a series of panels made of the finest fruit woods, depicting half-open cupboards above lecterns, benches, and finely wrought scrollwork. Every element in the room bespeaks the workings of a commanding, precise, and brilliant mind.

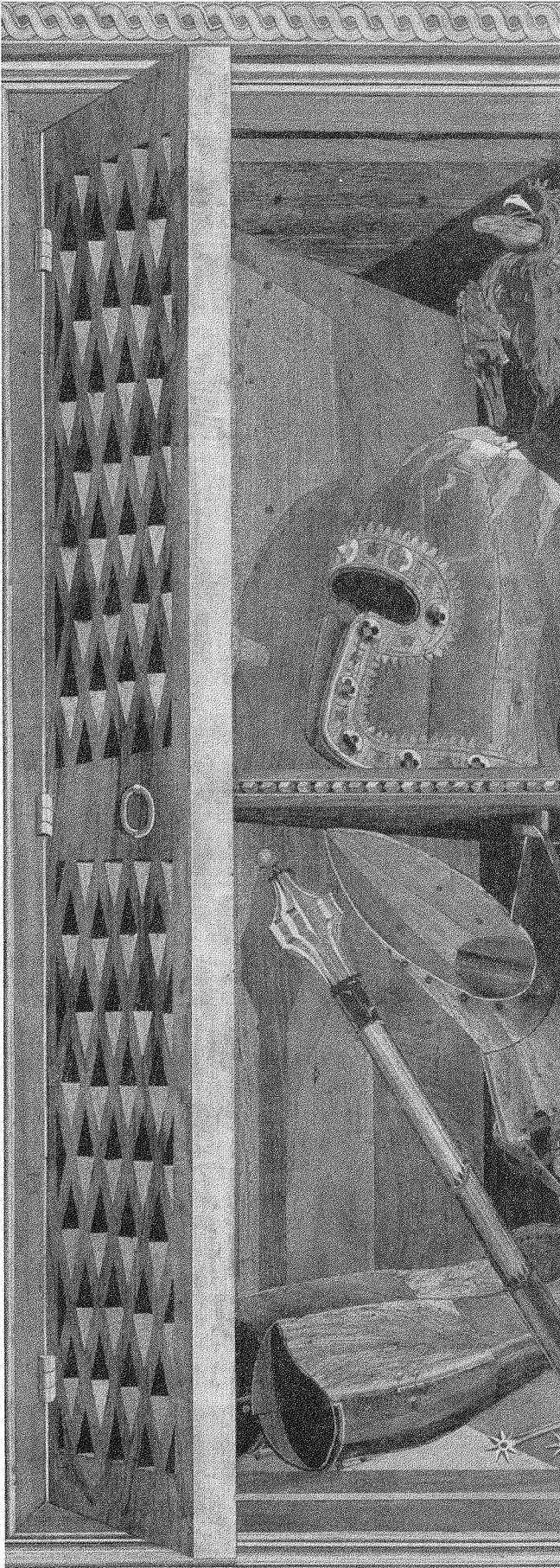
MARY CARRUTHERS is the author of *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* and *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (both published by Cambridge University Press).

The Duke's private study belies what we know of historical fact: Urbino was Italy's—and Europe's—supreme military commander. Yet the mood here is gentle. The Duke was an ambitious leader, an aristocrat, and a rigorous intellectual, but the images with which he surrounded himself speak of play—a parrot, a drum, a lute, and books. At the same time, the space seems to demand that one stand up a little straighter, to do one's best, whatever that might be.

The Studiolo at Gubbio, built in the 1470s, was designed at the same time that Italian painters discovered linear perspective. The room embodies the moment when the Middle Ages became the Renaissance. Science and art were one; mystical belief and scientific inquiry a unit. The light that

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beams in from three strategically placed windows creates an easy sense of intimacy, yet the wood-paneled walls also disorient. Objects move eerily in and out of the lattice-doored closets—each door is ajar, inviting eye and body closer. But these things are an artistic construct, an optical illusion. The walls are panels of wood intarsia, intricate designs of inlaid light and dark woods. With his artisans and designers, the Duke created a room that is an extended *trompe l'oeil*.

Before we move to the Studiolo Gubbio itself, let's stop by the study of an ancient Roman, here by the entrance hall to the Metropolitan Museum. It will give us some of the common elements, the precedents, to the craft of thought in the West. This is a small, elongated room painted in strong reds, blues, and greens, lots of gilt. You received your closest friends in here, talked household business, did accounts here. Along the walls there are theatrical images, the masks of Janus, and idyllic scenes. The focal point of the room is a couch because it is traditional for meditation. It's a rather hard one. Note the ornate ivory pillow rest, the carved ivory bedposts, depicting gods and characters from literature. There are friezes to view at every angle, and light pours in from the windows at the back.

In Roman education you composed while lying down. Meditation was done in a prone position; thinking was done horizontally. There's a scene in Cicero's *Dialogue on the Nature of Oratory* where they break for lunch. To answer questions from his students, one of the masters has a special couch brought to a room like this. He meditates his replies lying down with his eyes open. One of the younger men—who had asked a question earlier—comes in, recognizes this pose as deep meditation, respects it, and will not interrupt him. In our times, we have no poses that are recognized as meditation. The assumption, immediately upon seeing a man staring emptily into space, is "he's idle; he's not doing anything; he can be interrupted."

This room is a playground for the mind. The masks of Janus, the theatrical themes, intentionally imitate Roman stage sets. So, what you have is a meditational setting and a theatrical notion of decoration because contemplation, thinking, is regarded as play. No, you wouldn't fall asleep on this couch. Too hard for that. But, look, contrary to what we would expect, this meditation room is decorated with scenes of pleasure. They are theatrical, because to think is to *enter the theater of memory*. And memory, in classical rhetorical training, is a device of invention and composition, not a bin for the storage of information. It is not cramming for an examination, but to provide you with the materials for you to *construct* your own thought. You *make* thoughts in this world, you don't just "have" them, and so the frescos, the images, are references to stories and scenes to provide you with the materials for thinking. That's a very important idea to understand about this kind of memory work.

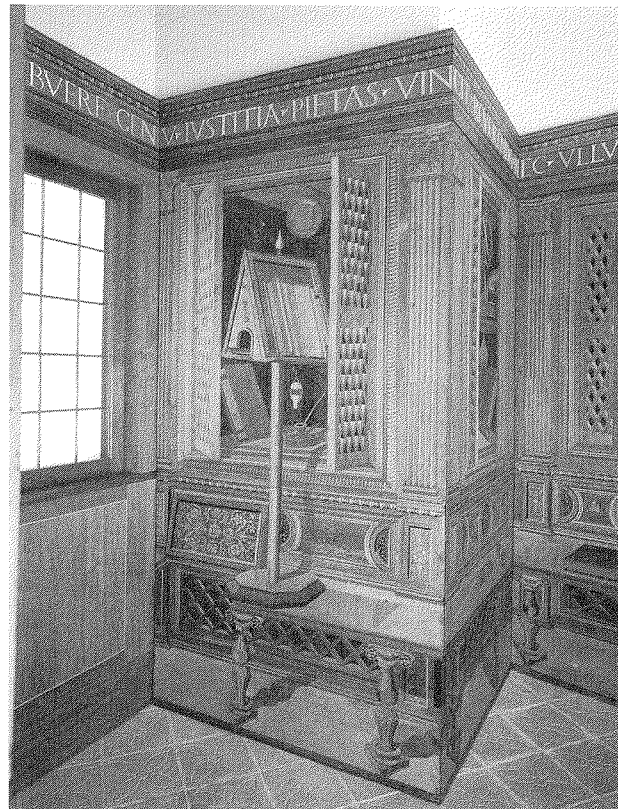
The prejudice against artificiality and theater comes from the Romantics and their notions about Nature and the individual. It's endemic in our culture, but not shared by earlier cultures at all. In fact, what they wanted to do was to make a theatrical impression. Remember that at the time of the Republic it was the duty of every Roman citizen to speak at the Forum. He had to be able to speak persuasively to an audience of his fellow citizens in the public arena of the Senate or the Forum. In fact, the greatest indication of mastery in any rhetorically trained Roman was the ability to speak on any subject without notes, in whole sentences, mentally composing one's speech with a discernable beginning, middle and end, using extended quotations from the ancients and bringing stories and anecdotes to bear upon the subject at hand.

And the amazing thing is that they could do it. The reason they could is because they had developed a "well-furnished" mind, set out in a series of imaginary small rooms, small enough to *compose*, from the Latin for "to bring together" or "to gather together." Later, that idea of gathering applies to prayer and it will become a major trope of Medieval monasticism.

"Mental furniture." They took this idea very seriously. You were trained from childhood to furnish the rooms of the mind—because you cannot think if you do not have something to think with, and thinking is the mark of the citizen. The object of education, moreover, was to provide the young person with a kind of mental library of materials, of texts, stories, anecdotes that he could draw upon quickly, easily and securely whenever he wished to engage in *composition*—literature, speech, a letter. And that idea never really left. Its focus just changed during the Middle Ages.

Now, let us move on down the hall and to the right to the Liberal Arts Studiolo from the Ducal Palace at Gubbio, Italy. Federico da Montefeltro, the Duke of Urbino, designed this room. It is very intimate, a mirror of Federico's mind. Everything in it is true to what matters to him, and you realize at once that he played with thought here. Everything in it relates to him: the English Order of the Garter that stands over the doorway and reappears at the center of the main wall, and, inside a series of latticework closets, opening out from every wall, is a parrot in a cage, books, an ermine and other heraldic emblems of his nobility, scientific and artistic tools. Everything in here relates to memory, everything is a mnemonic token: something used to trigger recollection and to make him feel comfortable.

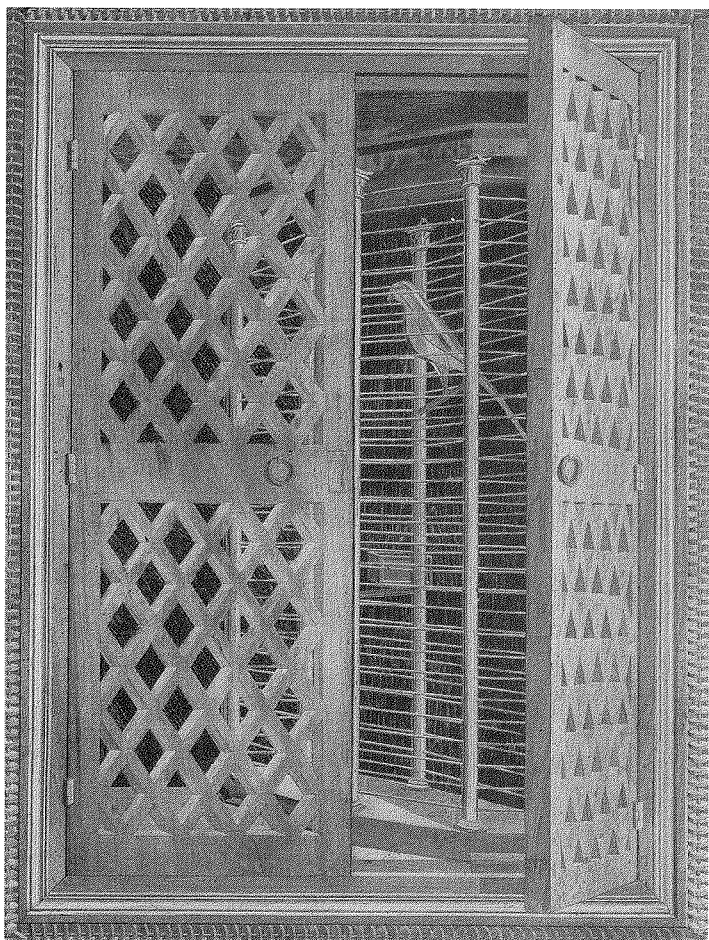
For example, the books were regarded as tools for memory, not alternatives to it. You used them for contemplation, for thinking about things. Reading at this time was generally done out loud. It was an intensive, engaged activity, not passive, as we commonly think of it. Reading was meant to engage the emotions and the mind. When you meditate, you do not purge the mind of emotion, but rather, you use memory to engage the emotions because emotional engagement was considered necessary to serious thought.



But let's go back to this room. No one would have come into this room, except perhaps to clean. Meditation and the places where thinking occurs were sacred spots, and no one would consider entering a study without permission. It was understood from antiquity that one should compose in a particular place, a familiar space where you could tune out everything else. There were "rules" one followed: the room should be well-lit, but not too bright. Objects should be set out in definite, predictable locations.

If you were the Duke of Urbino, you would be charged up. Your first thought, your first feeling upon walking into this space would be: "This is MY thinking room. This is my room." Not, "Gee, I am rich. Look at all these wonderful things I own," but, "Mentally, I have come home. This is a quiet space and familiar to me. I am surrounded by my things."

Now, in this space, I would read, write letters, think—but never sleep. No sleeping because I really look forward to thinking, to entering this theater of the mind and playing. I would surround myself with all that is familiar and beloved because it is the frame of mind that frees the mind. The belief is that routine frees the mind, it doesn't deaden it. And you must remember, this is pre-Protestant, pre-modern times, so pleasure combines with education and memory. The objects that we see here—mandolins, harps, drums, toys, things for having a good time—speak to the ruling literary principle that all literary works are to delight and instruct. That is not an either/or proposition. It is a both/and: you must do both at the same time. For example, the parrot in a cage over here is both an example of the exotic and—by



extension—a symbol of this man's wealth and power. But I think it stands for something more: parrots are playful, they are fun, but parrots also imitate. Now, there's good imitation and bad. But this image reminds me in some ways of those grotesqueries in the margins of (illuminated) prayerbooks. The prayer is serious, but the illustrations all along the margins are wildly funny.

Meditation is achieved by passing through a series of emotional states, some quite horrible—one does read of the “flesh becoming like pickles” in contemplation of Hell—en route to a final goal of glory. Where one begins in one's readings and thought certainly depends on where one would want to end up.

In the 1200s, a professor in Paris described memory as a little chamber of delights. Memory rejoices in things that are short—taken in only a little bit at a time. It needs to be kept nourished and delighted at the same time. I don't know why or when we began thinking that there should be no joy in thinking. Now, for a modern person to enter this room, your first response would have been that your mind would wander if it met with so much beauty, so many distractions. But, to this man, to antiquity and up through the Renaissance, the thought is that distraction keeps the mind going. That is the point: meticulous habits of mind in the company of all that is familiar and loved.

Special thanks to Dallas Galvin of Poetry Calendar for her help with this article—Ed.



PLUGS

“Oulipo” is the name of a group of mainly French writers who for the past 39 years have been inventing new and unusual ways to write. *The Oulipo Compendium* edited by Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie (Atlas Press) includes techniques, games, and a complete history of the Oulipo phenomenon. Lee Ann Brown's article in this issue describes a number of Oulipian techniques that she used with her students. *The Oulipo Compendium* is available from Teachers & Writers for \$20 plus \$4 shipping and handling.

Words over Walls: Starting a Writing Workshop in a Prison by poets Hettie Jones and Janine Pommy Vega is an informative, practical little guide available free of charge. Write to Prison Writing Program, Attn: Jackson Taylor, PEN American Center, 558 Broadway, Suite 401, New York, NY 10012. Tel. (212) 334-1660, fax (212) 334-2181.

Two summer writing workshops. Poet Denise Duhamel and novelist Kathleen Rockwell Lawrence are leading an intensive writing workshop at Alfred Vanderbilt's country retreat in New York's Adirondack Mountains, July 24–26. Call (315) 354-5311, ext. 21 for more information. Novelist Ellen Alexander Conley will be leading a weeklong workshop (June 21–27) in Montolieu, the mountain village in southern France noted for its lively secondhand book trade. Space limited. Call (212) 807-8166 for more information.

A friendly reminder. The deadline for submissions for T&W's Nature Writing anthology—June 30, 1999—is fast approaching. If you're working on something and have questions, feel free to call editors Christian McEwen (413-625-9560) or Mark Statman (718-768-5484), or T&W's Chris Edgar at 888-BOOKS-TW.

Personal Dictionaries

by Lee Ann Brown

The circle of the English language has a well-defined center, but no discernible circumference.—James Murray

I recently conducted a ten-week Teachers & Writers residency at City-As-School, an alternative high school in Manhattan. I titled the workshop “Personal Dictionaries,” as we focused on the births, deaths, and politics of words. The students, my co-teacher Tony Consiglio, and I explored how words come into a language and wrote our own reference books of words not yet in any dictionary. I designed the course as a creative exploration of different aspects of linguistics and language use: we read from a variety of published dictionaries—*Webster’s*, the *Oxford English*, etc.—as well as various slang and regional dictionaries covering African American slang, Panamanian English, and Southern English (written for Yankees). We continued with *Rhode Island Dictionary*, *The Joys of Yiddish*, and *The Totally Unofficial Rap Dictionary*, and then created our own dictionaries of favorite words or expressions, collected slang, school or neighborhood jargon, family or childhood words, taboo words, secret words, euphemisms, and coinages.

We also wrote poems using the dictionary as inspiration and sourcebook. As a poet, I’ve always enjoyed reading associationally through the dictionary. One day when looking at an unabridged dictionary I thought, “Everything I will ever write is in this book, only in a different order.” Then I realized I was wrong because of all the made-up words, private vocabularies, and new and future words that weren’t there. So I started writing my own dictionary, *Notes Towards My Own Peculiar Vocabulary*, and began thinking of ways to help other people write their own personal dictionaries. I like to tell the story of how my grandmother Obaa taught me how to sing “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” in “Big Words”:

Stintilight, Stintilight O globular Vivific
Fain may I fathom thy nature’s Specific
Loftily poised on either Capicious
Greatly resembles a gem carbonicious
Stintilight, Stintilight O globular Vivific
Fain may I fathom thy nature’s Specific

When she first sang it to me I remember asking, “Is that in English?” Upon learning that it was, I realized that parts of my own language were full of meaning and music. I didn’t

LEE ANN BROWN is the author of *Polyverse* (Sun & Moon) and the publisher of Tender Buttons Books. She teaches poetry and writing at Bard College’s Institute for Writing and Thinking, the Naropa Institute, and Barnard College.

know it at the time, but this helped start me on a lifelong love of language and “playing in the dictionary.”

I am very aware of what a revelation it is to many students when they learn that somebody actually *writes* the dictionary. The Personal Dictionaries workshop explores how people with different experiences use different words. We asked questions such as: How does a word pass from the “underground” into the culture at large? Who decides what words are included and why? What new forms of dictionary could we invent to better collect our words? We also looked at forms usually not thought of as written—indices, for example—as new resources for creative writing. (This helped to eliminate any lingering fears of the reference section that the students may have had.) The fact that personal dictionaries include words that aren’t in the *Unabridged Oxford English Dictionary* helps students more fully realize that language is not handed down from on high, but bubbles up from below.

My Personal Dictionaries workshop at City-As-School was part of an NBC grant designed to fund writers using the Classics to teach poetry in the classroom. While some might disagree, I believe the dictionary is a “classic text,” albeit a unique one in that it is always changing and has many permutations. The writing we did together, which we published in an anthology titled *City-As-Dictionary*, shows the many-sided usefulness and pleasure of words. Here are descriptions of some assignments we did, with the students’ responses.

Dictionary of Names

One of the first assignments was to explore our own names in various ways, including etymologically and historically, with the help of various name dictionaries. Then we took our own names apart and built them back up again poetically, through anagrams, acrostics, and “present beaus” (a poetic form—see description below).

The Story of Your Name

We began with focused freewrites that combined our own stories with information from various dictionaries of names. I asked students to tell me whatever they could about their names: how they got them; what they mean, including any etymological, ethnic, or historical meanings; who gave their names to them; their nicknames; what they would be named if they had been the opposite sex; what they wanted to be named at different ages—in short, every aspect of their name they could think of. Here are two students’ responses:

The History/Associations of My Name

My mom asked my older sister what she wanted to name me. My sister who was three at the time said that she wanted to name me Sena. Mom also wanted some input in my name so she asked my sister if it was OK for her to name me Serena. At the time my mother thought she created my name. That was until she saw it in a book and found out that it meant calm and serene.

—Serena Jones

My name is a very common name. I'm actually glad that my name is Mayra Ivette Sanchez, which was not what my parents were originally going to name me. I thank a very close family friend, because it was her idea to give me my name. My parents were going to name me Manuela because they said that I looked just like my father when he was a baby.

Everyone in my family likes to play with my name. They call me Marylu, Marilis, Marita, or just plain M. Everyone else usually spells my name wrong, like Myra.

I changed the spelling to my original name which was spelled Maira. I felt that was a very common way to spell it.

—Mayra Sanchez

Present Beaus

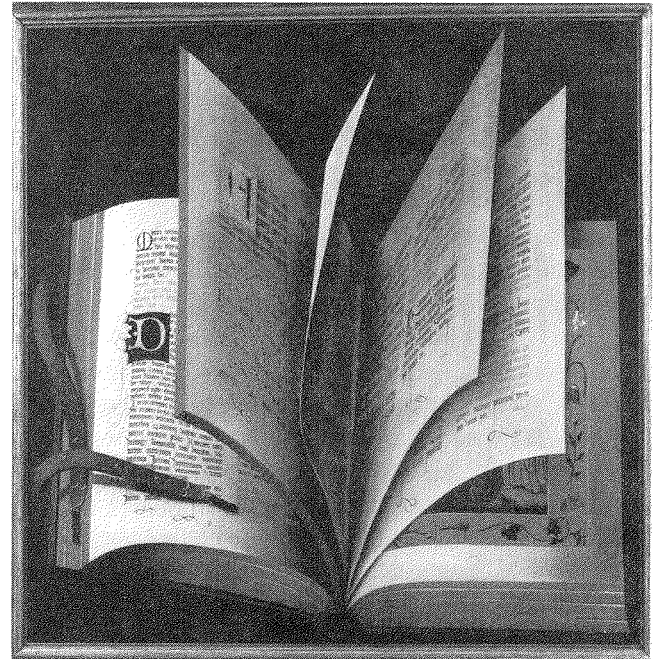
The second name experiment we did helped us to see our names in new ways. A "present beau" is a poem in which only the letters that make up a certain name or word can be used. The desired result, after taking your name apart and rearranging its letters in different combinations, is to see your name (and self) in an entirely new light. I especially like the musical quality that results from the same sounds reassembled into different orders.

Present beaus are easier and more improvisational than writing anagrams because you can use or repeat letters as many times as you wish. It is one of the many techniques invented by the contemporary, experimental French collective of writers and scientists called "Oulipo."* (The group's name is an acronym of *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or "Workshop of Potential Literature.") Oulipian techniques are intended to make the production of literature something anyone can do. When I have students write present beaus, I usually begin by doing one on the board with the students. I ask one student to reorder the letters of his or her name in alphabetical order. Next, I ask everybody to brainstorm as many words as they can think of that start with those letters. After we get a good nexus of words, I ask everyone to compose one line out of those or any other words they've come up with. We then combine the lines into a finished poem.

Here are the words Mayra Sanchez generated out of her name:

Ant, Yarn, Cheese, Sit, Sat, May, Mary, Amy, Ray, Race, Car, Sea, Met, Save, Tease, Tear, Nice, Mice, Never, My, Is, An, Sam, Man, Men, Chase, Air, Meet, Care, Rice, Seven, Heaven, Many, Am, I.

* For more about Oulipo, see *The Oulipo Compendium* edited by Alastair Brotchie and Harry Mathews (Atlas Press, 1998) or *Georges Perec: A Life in Words* by David Bellos (David R. Godine, 1993).



And here is her short poem:

My seven mice never tease Mary.

Many men chase Mary.

I ate rice and sat on cheese.

—Mayra Sanchez

Here are a few more present beaus:

Camille Clark

I make a call
a calm, clear call
A claim I make
I'm calm?
A killer car
A lame male lark
A crime!!!
I call kim
I call mark
A killer car!!!
All came.

—Camille Clark

Present Beau

Taboo villagers tell tall tales:
Ants brave bears to save lost loves;
Rats beat ants to sell stale ale;
Stellar bear store real ale at rails.

Commentary

On the night that we first had this assignment, I went home and had a bright idea. I decided to try and find an anagram of my full name, if that was possible. I decided to use Scrabble tiles to assist me. I came up with something that said something about robot, but I didn't like it. After a while I came up with something that sounded half decent. I liked the sound of "taboo villagers";

it made me think of stories that I've heard about the place of my birth (Transylvania). It just fit. Anyhow, I decided to use that as the first line of my poem and work with it from there. It was fun because my name had lots of words in it and I guess I threw together stuff that rhymed and made some kind of sense. And presto! A poem was born.

—Gabriella Otvos

Present Beau of My Name

"Leer near John or any Jason's Norse eel," Nora says.
Yo no Jell-O Ross!
See Jessie's a non lean, neat, easy loan.
Ann nor Lena see a rose.

—Serena Jones

Bibliomancy

To further set in motion the evocative associational properties of language, we tried a divination exercise called "Bibliomancy." I learned this technique from Diane di Prima during a workshop at the Naropa Institute, in which she discussed using chance methodology to find and interpret the answers to questions. She suggested using sources such as the *I Ching*, Shakespeare, or the *Bhagavad-Gita*; I decided to apply her techniques to the dictionary.

I asked each student to write down a question he or she would like to ask a fortuneteller, then to open either a favorite book or one of the many dictionaries we had on hand, to pick the first word or phrase that met the eye, and then to interpret what that word or phrase might mean.

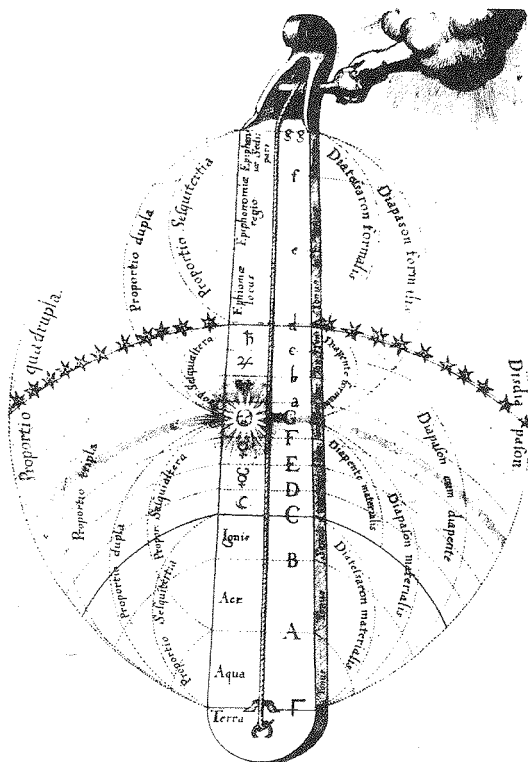


Fig. 160. The Universe Conceived as a Monochord

Bibliomancy Journal

If I went to a fortune teller, what three questions would I ask?

Will I receive money?

Marble. All statues are made of Parian Marble.

What will my love life be like?

Foundation, of society, i.e., property, family, religion, respect for authority. Invoke angrily if they are being undermined.

What will my career be like?

Leather—all leathers come from Russia.

Interpretation:

I don't understand how the words I picked from a book can give me the answers for what I search for in the future. I guess that in the first question what I see is that marble is expensive and that there will be money in my future. In the second, it might be that my future will probably involve all of the things as said and also be like it. Foundation, meaning lots of children; property could be a house; family might be that I still have good connections with my immediate family; religion means that I will be involved with the church; respect for authority, that I will have a good job, paying good money. And "invoke angrily if they are being undermined" definitely means that if anyone comes between my family and me, I will be highly pissed off!

Last, but not least, the last question would mean the kind of job I would have. Probably selling leathers, making them, or running a company involving leathers. I like the way my future looks. Only time will tell.

—Angelina Lopez

Bibliomancy Journal

Will I have a son if I decide to have kids?

Word: Great Grandmother

I'll take that as a yes. My son will have children and his children will have children and I'll live to be a ripe old age!

—Dailey Greene

Bibliomancy

Book used: *Media Control* by Noam Chomsky.

Q: Will mankind destroy itself before it destroys everything else?

A: "Central American solidarity work grew mostly out of churches, mainly because they exist."

Interpretation: I think that the answer means that religion will destroy mankind because it is something that only we are dumb enough to have so I take this to mean that churches will be our downfall. I also think that Central American solidarity is an oxymoron.

—Serena Jones

Bibliomancy

Will I find happiness?

"Mr. Destiny. A stranger gives a man a chance to change fate."

Am I going to be successful?

"Aliens: Are We Alone?"

Have I met my soulmate yet?

"Smilla's Sense of Snow: mystery."

Wow, that was kind of scary. That first question is always answered the same way. I've asked tarot cards and God and I keep getting the same answer: it's up to destiny. That second answer is funny. I take it to mean that if there are aliens then I'll be successful. Too bad I don't believe in aliens. The third one is beyond me. That's what I get for doing this exercise with a *TV Guide*.

—Mayra Sanchez

Childhood and Family Words, and Slang Journals

Finally, we got to the act of actually writing our own dictionaries. We made dictionaries that collected family and childhood words, exploring the most micro of cultures: the family.

To get them started, we read some entries from several dictionaries of slang, as well as the hilarious *Family Words: The Dictionary for People Who Don't Know a Frone from a Brinkle* by Paul Dickson. (I've found that when you acquire a new dictionary you want to introduce into the classroom, it's a good idea to spend some time with it and select words that will intrigue the reader. Make your own set of flashcards or other system for having them at your fingertips.) I also introduced my students to some little-known words I had gathered from friends and from other dictionary classes I had taught. Some of these are known to only a select few: a small circle of friends, a family, a neighborhood. As an example of a "family word," I told them a friend's parents' term for a sharp curve in the road: a "C.O.D. Curve." The term describes how when you drive around the curve the person in the passenger seat is thrown against the driver's side. C.O.D. is an abbreviation for "Come over, dear."

As for slang, we wrote down all the slang words we could think of, and then wrote journal entries or short narratives using as many of the slang words as we could. We worked as word anthropologists, gathering words from our neighborhoods, from movies, or from overheard conversation. Some students then wrote glossaries to their slang journals. It was interesting to me which words they picked to gloss—leaving some words in the text out, I assume, because they thought everyone knew them already.

When I first introduced the concept of gathering slang or colloquial expressions, I encountered some resistance from the students. They argued that there was nothing to collect. So I asked them if they thought I spoke in a different way than they did (I am from North Carolina). They immediately said yes. Next I told them I was interested in references I'd heard them use, since I hadn't known all of them. It took some drawing out of examples, but soon students began to see in concrete ways that we all are fluent in several jargons, lingos, and specialized languages, and that we "code switch" depending on what company we're in. I wanted them to recognize that we often switch registers, and that this switching can be a bonus to us as thinkers, writers, and speakers. Knowing that the dominant "official language" culture is only kept alive and vibrant by the words entering from newly invented terms and situations that arise from new cul-

tural contexts, we can understand more about how culture forms. If we all talked alike, the world would be a boring place. We also discussed taboo words and euphemisms, and how certain words around "touchy subjects" such as love, sex, money, bodily excretions, or death are particularly rich areas for slang.

Next, we played a modified version of the popular game called Dictionary, trying to fool each other with obscure or new slang. Someone would pick a term and write it on the board. Then we all wrote down what we thought it meant, and went around the room and read our definitions. One student picked the term "be out," which I guessed meant "to live openly as a gay person." Almost everyone else knew that it meant "to leave."

Then I gave the students the following assignments to do:

1. *Childhood / Family Words*. Include at least ten words that you used as a child, and/or your family uses, either because someone you know invented them, or because it's your family's jargon or it's somehow related to the particular language history of your parents or grandparents.

Speculate and/or elaborate on the word origin. For example, if someone used the phonemic pair or made-up word *fa fa* for "french fries" as a child, could this have been because of the physical difficulty young children might have with the diphthong, *fr*?

2. *Slang*. "Slang is language that takes off its coat, spits on its hands—and goes to work," said Carl Sandberg. Expand your vocabulary by direct observation, using sociolinguistic research. While on the bus, subway, ferry or in a public place where you can observe people speaking around you, take notes on a particular conversation that catches your ear. Actually transcribe words that seem unusual to you or that you don't use yourself, or ones that you do use but that are still considered slang. Are there are words or phrases that "do the job" better than a more normative type of expression?

I had them use the following form to flesh out their dictionary entries:

Word or Phrase (part of speech). Definition(s). Origin (speculate, if necessary). Example or Usage (use in a sentence).

Here is one example:

Brooknam: Brook•nam (noun). Place name for Brooklyn, emphasizing how some sections are like the battle zones of Vietnam. Brooklyn + Vietnam. Example: "My cousin wants to get out of Brooknam."

Here are some other terms we came up with:

Be ghost: leave or leaving.

Golden boy: stumbling fool. "My father is a golden boy because he is in love with the wrong woman."

Had my back: backed me up, was looking out for me. "When I was in a big fight I thought that my friend had my back."

Krunk: phat, cool. "I think that the new cargo pants for girls are krunk."

Mad: a lot. “The boy had mad candy in his pocket.”
Merk: leave, or get killed. “I told this girl to merk because she was getting on my nerves.”
Monet: looks good from afar but bad up close. “I thought this guy looked like a Monet from afar but when they introduced me to him up close I thought ACNE CITY.” (Originally from an artist.)
Off the hook: crazy, unusual. “I can admit my report was off the hook and that’s why my teacher liked it so much.”
Peepin’: meaning to see or to look.
Ratchet: gun. “My friend went and got his ratchet after the fight.”
Scrap (verb): to fight. “I had to scrap three girls in one day and messed them up.”
The bomb: a trend that blew up, got hot, bigger, popular. “When the blue and grey Jordans first came out they were the bomb.”
What’s the dillyo: What’s the deal you all? (A short cut)

—Angelina Lopez

Pop Culture and Altered Songs

Pop culture is another vast source of new words. As an experiment, the students and I watched a martial arts movie and did some homophonic mistranslations from the Chinese. We talked about the internationally famous rap group Wu Tang Clan’s adoption and transformation of terms like “Shaolin” for “Staten Island,” their home base. I picked a portion of the film and covered over the subtitles. I then asked the students to tell me what the Chinese sounded like in English. I played the clip over several times until everyone got a sense of it. When they’d finished writing, the students all read their “translations.”

Some students were more receptive to this exercise than others. I found I had to stop and explain what I meant by “the music of the words.” We discussed the idea that words from one language could sound like words in another, and that a translation based on sound rather than “meaning” can capture certain aspects of the original. One example of homophonic translation I commonly use is from Celia and Louis Zukofsky’s Catullus poems: the line “Miser Catullus” becomes “Miss her, Catullus?” instead of “Poor Catullus.” Some of the meaning comes across, but it is altered, and a new dimension surfaces.

Semo-Definitional Poetry

For another session, the students brought in their favorite songs and transcribed them. Then they altered the lyrics using a dictionary or “freestyle” rewriting. We used another Oulipian method called “semo-definitional poetry.” Semo-definitional poetry is a technique in which you look up a word in a pre-existing text and replace it with the entire dictionary definition. Here’s my example using a well-known nursery rhyme:

Hey Diddle, Diddle

The carnivorous quadruped, felus domesticus which has long been domesticated and the stringed musical instrument of the viol kind, usually a violin,

The female of the domestic or any bovine animal jumped over the satellite of the earth; a secondary planet, whose light, derived from the sun, is reflected to the earth, and serves to dispel the darkness of the night.

In another exercise, Mayra somehow transformed a generic, lovelorn pop song into something odd-angled and strange. She said of her result: “Believe it or not, I like my verse better than the original, because I have broken down every word and given its meaning.”

Noun + 7

Next, I introduced the students to another way of “processing” a text through a dictionary. We used the Oulipian formula, “N + 7” (Noun + 7), in which all the nouns in a text are replaced by the seventh noun following them in the dictionary. We used various dictionaries to vary the outcome of “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.” We wrote poems on banners that we draped around the room. As with the other assignments, some of the students went on to create further variations on the initial experiment. Here’s a version of “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” derived by Tony Consiglio and myself, using words from *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook* by Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf:

Twinkle Twinkle, little Substandard Housing Unit,
 How I wonder what you are.
 Up above the White Collar Crime so high,
 Like a Diseasist Language in the Suffragette.
 Twinkle Twinkle, little Substandard Housing Unit,
 How I wonder what you are.

Twinkle twinkle, little static
 How I wonder what young banton are
 Up above the works so high
 Like a dinosaur in the sky
 Twinkle twinkle, little static
 How I wonder what young banton are

Here are some student examples:

My literal version:

Twinkle twinkle, little burning ball of gas
 How I ponder what you are
 Up above the planet that consists of water and living things so high
 Like a shining mineral found in sedimentary rocks in the sky
 Twinkle twinkle, little burning ball of gas
 How I wonder what you are

—Dailey Greene

Twinkle, twinkle little successism
 How I wonder what you are
 Up above the zoo-keeper so high
 Like a disruptive child in the spouse
 Twinkle, twinkle little successism
 How I wonder what you are

—Angelina Lopez, Jennifer Rose Albino & Camille Clarke

Commentary by Angelina Lopez: The way I came up with this altered version was that I looked up the word and counted three words down. If it was a noun, I'd replace the original noun with the new word. It really doesn't have any meaning to me. It doesn't even make sense. It was just a creative way of doing it.

I also had students make flashcards for me with words they liked. These had the word on one side and the definition on the other. I passed the flashcards around and asked the students each to compose a poem using the words, then do a translation of it as a parallel, semo-definitional text. One good example that showed the different registers of language was by Gabrielle Otvos. Gabrielle's poem began with the line "The pousy cat woman," which Gabrielle interpreted as "The fat and short-winded Eartha Kitt." She wrote two parallel poems using words from a wide variety of sources. *Cat woman*, *crush*, *crutch*, *collared a broom* and *fur* come from Clarence Major's *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of Afro-American Slang*; those related to *spermoline* ("having to do with chipmunks") are from the *Describer's Dictionary*. *Kline shopping* is student jargon at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, where I had taught the summer before (Kline Commons is the name of the dining hall; *Kline shopping* is the illegal stashing of food for later dorm-room consumption).

Poem

The pousy cat woman
who resembled a spermoline, collared a broom
after going kline shopping.

Due to a speeding crutch,
her crush and her fur
fell off
and she became
rale chunky.

Translation:

The fat and short-winded Eartha Kitt
who looked like a chipmunk, left as fast
as a witch on a broom after
picking up extra food scraps.

Because of a speeding car,
her felt hat and her wig
fell off
and she became
really upset.

—Gabriella Otvos

Dictionaries of Received Ideas

We also read excerpts from Gustave Flaubert's *Dictionary of Received Ideas*—which Flaubert conceived as a second volume to his novel, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*—and Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary*. Flaubert's *Dictionary* satirizes French society of the day; Bierce does the same with 1860s America. Both make fun of polite society, gender relations, and politics—all still fertile areas for satire. These prompted



Fig. 248. A Demonstration of Legerdemain, 18th Century

our own satirical Dictionaries of Received Ideas ("received" as in handed down from an Orwellian "Big Brother"). First, we wrote down journal entries on conflicts with authority figures—people, situations or institutions that irritated us or gave us problems. Then we wrote definitions for our own satirical dictionaries. Though some students didn't immediately grasp the subtle technique of satire, they all relished the opportunity to rail against authority figures in class. Here is a list from one student ("The Kids" entry, particularly, shows her understanding of what a satirical dictionary is):

Received Ideas

Advertising: a technique used by capitalists to take advantage of consumers by using sex, money and false hopes to take their money.

Police: A pawn of the prosperous few to keep the many restless in line.

"The Kids": Someone for whom you claim to be doing something for, when in actuality you are only helping yourself.

Them: Anyone who does you wrong or who you feel oppressed by.

—Serena Jones

The poet Jack Spicer, when asked what book he would choose if he were marooned on a desert island and could have only one, chose the Third Edition of the *Unabridged Websters'*. My students might agree with his choice. Language is the material with which we write, and I believe my Personal Dictionaries residency really did bring the students to see language in a new way. Testimony of this is the wide range of writing they produced—original dictionaries, poems, mini-essays, and commentaries about the power of words. The spellcheck on my computer went crazy with all of these great new non-normative spellings, some of which I'm sure will make it into next year's official dictionary revisions.

Dictionary Source List

(I encourage you to add your own entries to this!)

- Beyond Jennifer & Jason.* Linda Rosenkrantz and Pamela Redmond Satran. St. Martin's, 1994. Interesting name book with categories such as old-fashioned names that deserve to be revived, and adopted place-names (Wyoming, River, Atlanta, Montana). N.B.: Jennifer and Jason were two of the most popular names of the 1970s.
- The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language.* David Crystal. Cambridge, 1997. Highly recommended resource for dictionary history and categories of inquiry. The section on "toponomastics" or place names is extremely helpful, as are the many sections on Creole and English variants.
- The Describer's Dictionary: A Treasury of Terms & Literary Quotations.* David Grambs. Norton, 1995. Lists very specific descriptive terms for animals, plants, architecture, body types, etc.
- The Devil's Dictionary.* Ambrose Bierce. Oxford, 1998.
- Dictionary.* Samuel Johnson. (4 editions, 1755–73). Cambridge, 1996.
- A Dictionary of Panamanian English.* Leticia C. Thomas Brereton. One of my adult students, originally from Panama, showed me this one. Contains many great neologisms, and Panamanian English's combinations of Spanish and English. Samples include *oonwei*: stubborn (own+way); *pleigoos*, to be elusive (play + ghost); *zami*, lesbian (les+ amis); *chichong*, a hit on the head (onomatopoetic).
- Dictionary of Received Ideas.* Gustave Flaubert. Geoffrey Wall, trans. Penguin USA, 1995.
- A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English: Colloquialisms and Catch-phrases, Fossilised Jokes and Puns, General Nicknames, Vulgarisms, and Such Americanisms as Have Been Naturalized.* Eric Partridge. A great slang dictionary. (Unfortunately out of print.)
- A Dictionary of the Underworld.* Eric Partridge. NTC/Contemporary Publishing, 1998. A dictionary of cant, "the vocabularies of crooks, criminals, racketeers, beggars, tramps, convicts, the commercial underworld, the drug traffic," gathered from many countries. Favors British terms such as *alley-apple* (a stone, brickbat, or fragment of paving, used as a missile in street fighting); also includes slang from New Zealand, the United States, South Africa, and Australia.
- English as a Second F*cking Language.* Sterling Johnson. St. Martin's, 1996. Written by an English professor, who after seeing his ESL students struggle to understand quotidian spoken English, realized that "curse" and sexual terms in all their permutations and usages are necessary for a working knowledge of our language.
- The Faber Dictionary of Euphemisms.* R. W. Holder. Faber & Faber, 1990.
- Family Words: The Dictionary for People Who Don't Know a Frone from a Brinkle.* Paul Dickson. Broadcast Interview Source, 1998
- Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang.* Clarence Major. Penguin USA, 1994. An excellent resource, and one of the students' favorites. Provides dates of usage, and oral or literary sources. A few samples: *crumbcrusher*, baby; *dis*, disrespect; *dirtnap*, to die or be buried (euphemism); *dirtfarm*, gossip-mongering abode.
- I Remember.* Joe Brainard. Penguin USA, 1995. List-like "dictionary of memories," making a self-portrait.
- Jargon Watch: A Pocket Dictionary for the Jitterati.* Gareth Branwyn. Hardwired, 1997. Dictionary of computer terminology. Example: *prairie-dogging*, popping your head up above your office cubicle (or "cube farm") to see what's happening.
- The Joys of Yiddish.* Leo Rosten. Pocket Books, 1991. Very detailed explanations of Yiddish expressions with humorous pronunciation guides.
- The New American Dictionary of Baby Names.* Leslie Dunkling and William Gosling. Signet, 1991. There are tons of baby-name dictionaries; I found this one particularly interesting.
- The New Orleans 7th Ward Nostalgia Dictionary: 1938–1965.* Darryn A. Smith. From the author's own commentary: "This is a quick reference to words and expressions that are part of the nostalgia of hundreds of people—those who grew up in the Seventh Ward and those who wished they did; those who left, those who remained and all who want to remember the ambiance. You will vicariously experience customs, recipes, and celebrations and laugh over clothing styles, insect names, homemade toys and remedies."
- The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook.* Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf. Villard, 1993. Satirical dictionary of "P.C. speak."
- The Old Farmers Almanac.* Published annually by Villard. Contains interesting catalogues and dictionary-like lists, such as the names of all the different moons (New Moon, Blue Moon, Mean Moon, Harvest Moon etc.).
- Rhode Island Dictionary.* Mark Patinkin. Douglas Charles Press, 1993. Satirical dictionary by a Providence Journal columnist, complete with cartoons. My favorite entry, *spahk plugs*, has a drawing of a spark plug with Spock ears and Leonard Nimoy's face, illustrating Rhode Islanders' propensity to drop *r* sounds.
- A Concise Etymological Dictionary of the English Language.* W. W. Skeats. Available in several editions. One of the best etymological dictionaries.
- The Totally Unofficial Rap Dictionary.*
<http://www.sci.kun.nhlthalia/rapdict/dictionary>



Illôt-Mollo and Other Games

by Jack Collom

Kent Denver is an independent school for sixth through twelfth grade boys and girls, located in rolling fields with little cattail swamps and ponds, on the south edge of the Mile-High City. The school actively seeks, and obtains, a diversified student body; the atmosphere is down-to-earth, learning-dedicated. The chief sport you see being practiced in the grass as you walk to the Middle School teachers' room is lacrosse. I've been working at Kent for at least ten years, teaching seventh graders three or more days a year, mostly with Alan Smiley, a dedicated teacher and an energetic writer himself. Classes are fairly small and are held in down-to-business circular rooms. (A couple of years ago I went to an assembly between classes to see and hear Madeleine Albright, a Kent alumna, speak earnestly on the state of the world.)

Last spring I was able to introduce a few new (to me) writing approaches during my annual visit. I've been excited lately by writing ideas that tend to bring one's context into the fray as "co-author." A technique that I learned from one of my M.F.A. students (Rachel Levitsky) is a "wall of words." This is a group method that involves objects passed around, attention drawn to the immediate environs, plus trade-off reading aloud—while everyone is writing—of a text. Such exercises encourage students to allow into their writings more than just their own mental processes; one's surroundings become noted as expansive source fields.

Another of these contextual exercises is one called "illôt-mollo," which I discovered in a book called *Surrealist Games*. To do illôt-mollo, a circle of writer-players gathers and begins freewriting—scribbling—anything that comes to mind. The twist is this: every twelve to fifteen seconds, in strict rotation, a writer announces a word he or she has just written. Everybody must incorporate this "marker word" into their text and then keep writing, and so it goes around the circle, or as long as desired. After we stop, I find it good to give everybody a couple of minutes to bring their pieces to an end, read them over for legibility, and make little revisions. Reading the pieces aloud is usually a feast of humor and ingenuity and the various weavings of similarity and difference. Here's a sample from *Surrealist Games* (marker words in italics):

JACK COLLOM teaches poetry to K–12 students in Colorado schools, and to B.A. and M.F.A. students at the Naropa Institute. He is the author of *Moving Windows* and co-author, with Sheryl Noethe, of *Poetry Everywhere* (both published by T&W). His most recent book of poems is *Dog Sonnets* (Jensen-Daniels, 1998).

Your *hair of rare feather* swims in the vulnerable *night* that *spreads* upon folds of inaccessible *fog*. This *evening* I'm bogged down and your damp *shoulders end* up burying me under the *gaze* of the *veiled* bird of smiles and mad *laughter*. Come at *day-break*, under the murderous *flames*, *drowsy* from homecoming. *Boredom* leaks from the *wells* around your *devil's* eyes, in which the *glowworm* is born. Here I *designate* under the strength of unknown *territories*, the little-known discord of hands *painted* on an *eye*, the limpid *open eye* of the night.

—Anonymus

And here are two examples from one session at Kent, this time with the marker words unmarked:

George the dog walks down the stairs in the cool cold morning. All of a sudden he begins to run as he realizes he is being chased by a chicken and a bird. All of a sudden he falls off a cliff into the ocean. He grabs onto a floating popsicle. He looks over and a frog wearing nail polish is on the popsicle. All of a sudden the ocean drains away through a hole and people start playing soccer in a cafeteria with food. George gets hit in the face with a piece of cheese and his toe goes into an electrical outlet. He turns into a beast. He barks. He bites, he chases cows. Then he sees another dog and they go and sit in chairs and are happy. Everything is great, as the two begin to read poems to each other. It feels like they are on a beach as the sun bakes them. George begins to draw animals with a pen. An old man with an accordion appears. He plays loud obnoxious music before disappearing inside his red banana peel house. All of a sudden George looks up and sees a book with an elephant on it. He stands up and swats at the book with a stick, like a mime. The elephant throws a brick at George. George goes down. He sees a clock with ink pouring out of it, as he floats watching cartoons on the TV.

—Harry Morgan

She stared at the sparkling light from the morning sunrise. It was so weird she heard the chicken cackling in the background as the birds flew over the ocean. She once again looked up at the sky. This time she noticed a popsicle-shaped spaceship. She squinted and saw purple frogs wearing nail polish flying the interesting UFO. The light became brighter as she stared at it like she would watch a soccer game. She hungrily walked into the cafeteria and got some food to eat. She wondered about the light more as she ate the cheese sandwich. She then saw the source of the light, the electrical outlet. But that couldn't be all, it had to be the beast in the corner eating the cows that were used for milk. She looked out again and saw a playful dog that was running toward an odd chair. She then saw the light fade away and she grew so happy that she started to write poems about what she saw. She wrote about the beach she stood on and she wrote it with an odd-looking pen. She then wrote about many animals. She didn't know why but she did. The animals were playing accordions, making such a beautiful sound that you couldn't hear in the best house that had many banana peels. A red house wouldn't even make

such a noise. She got so carried away she wrote a twenty-page book, until her pet elephant came and stomped on it, causing it to look like a stick. She threw the book, or stick, to the mime that she saw by the brick house. She followed up the house with her eyes and saw the sky was filled with ink. She turned to the clock, suddenly it was speeding up. She quickly turned on the television set and saw cartoons moving as fast as the clock. She then looked up to the sky again. It was back to normal. She sighed.

—Maggie Martinez

About three years ago I learned the following exercise from a Naropa Writing Outreach student, who'd found it in a book. Each participant writes a "secret" (usually a made-up one) in a sentence or two on a slip of paper. These slips are dropped into a hat, and each person pulls one out (hoping not to get his or her own). The writing task is to expand on the secret. Students may tell the story behind the secret, describe what happens next, or take any approach they like to flesh it out.

Here are two from Kent:

"My dog is a psychopathic creature."

He goes under our floorboard and eats rats. When he is finished, he goes outside and tries to run through the fence. He is never successful. He has only three legs—he bit one of them off. He can't walk straight because his head is all screwed up after hitting the fence so many times. He jumps into pools without any water, then pretends to be swimming. He lies upside down in the rain, trying to catch some in his mouth. He always ends up soaked but slightly refreshed when he's done. He stands under an apple tree and tries to jump up and bite one. He hits the tree, but never manages to get an apple....

—Jon Bathgate

"I can fly."

After my midnight voyage to the stars, I landed in my Martian bed. The stars were and are my only comfort floating and effortlessly flying. Both of us are alone, never going anywhere, yet we never stay still either. During the ceaseless hours of flight, I wish I could walk like people on other planets. If I didn't always have to fly with the stars, I would be able to have talking companions. I wouldn't have to spend my days with tasteless moldy-cheese stars. Although flying was fun when I was first able to fly, it is now dull. Now I wish I could stop long enough at a wishing well to end what I have wished too many years ago.

—Emily W.

A third, related writing idea came to me during my residency at Kent. This one just popped up on the spur of the moment. I often do pass-around, collaborative poems with students: these are a lot of fun, stimulating to the imagination, and also help to build the sense of creative writing as coming from all around, not just from one's own thoughts. In this case, something about the group dynamics impelled me to try pass-around acrostics of POETRY LIVES! Here are two:

Perfect crystals developing in Nature,
Oddly imperfect,



Collage by André Breton

Everything means nothing.
The trees are wrong.
Reality rolls in like a river of hydrochloric acid.
You look around seeing nothing but lies.

Life is like a box of chocolates;
Inside you never know what you're going to get, or
Vice versa, and you don't like what you get. Excellent,
Elegant chocolates are filled with gold.
Sunburned hairless dogs scour the earth.

Poetry is a form of expressing
One is over the top.
"Excellent!" you think, "I am like a buzzard soaring lazy circles in
Telephones ringing through the sky."
Rich and creamy frogs ribbit in Rick Ricardo's house.
Yellow daffodils die in the winter.

Lizards sun under the rocks in the heat of the day;
Iguanas are not tasty with moldy peanuts.
Voting for Clinton was a huge mistake.
Every evening the sun goes down—don't worry, you've always
got another day.
Staying on Earth is a mistake—go to Mars!

During the three days, fifteen sessions, we tried a variety of entries into poetry: "I Remember" pieces; "Going Inside" poems (idea from poet Sheryl Noethe, using the Charles Simic poem "Stone"); 2 x 4 poems (a little shape I made up); lures (a haiku variant from Robert Kelly); "poetic science" statements; acrostics using phrases (instead of single words); portrait or sketch poems; "Thirteen Ways of Looking..." poems (after Wallace Stevens's famous blackbird poem); "How-I-Write" poems (exploring the context of the act of writing); poems about poetry; and question-and-answer partner writings. The selected works amounted to twenty-four packed pages. We published and distributed our anthologies to all the seventh graders at Kent, where I hope they spurred a many-colored enthusiasm for poetry.

Bibliography

Surrealist Games. Compiled by Alastair Brotchie. Edited by Mel Gooding. Shambhala Redstone Editions, 1993.

An Interview with John Ashbery

by Daniel Kane

I talked to John Ashbery about one of his poems—and how one could teach the poem to people of high school age. The poem I chose was “What Is Poetry,” from his book, *Houseboat Days*.

What Is Poetry

The medieval town, with frieze
Of boy scouts from Nagoya? The snow

That came when we wanted it to snow?
Beautiful images? Trying to avoid

Ideas, as in this poem? But we
Go back to them as to a wife, leaving

The mistress we desire? Now they
Will have to believe it

As we believed it. In school
All the thought got combed out:

What was left was like a field.
Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around.

Now open them on a thin vertical path.
It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?

DK: What kinds of poetry were taught to you in school when you were a teenager? Was all the thought really combed out?

JA: When I was a teenager, which was in the early 1940s, the high school English textbooks that we had stopped with Robert Frost, as far as modern poetry was concerned. I had to look elsewhere to find modern poets that really interested me, though at the time Frost really did. I received as a prize in high school a Louis Untermeyer anthology of twentieth-century modern British and American poetry. There I discovered poets such as W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, and Wallace Stevens, whom I immediately began to read with great enjoyment. I found more of their poetry in the library, and from then on read as much contemporary poetry as I could get my hands on.

DK: Did it help you as a student of poetry to start with contemporary poetry first, and then work your way back through history? I know some teachers will introduce poetry to stu-

JOHN ASHBERY has won many prizes, including the Pulitzer Prize, the Bollingen Prize, and the National Book Award. His most recent book of poems is *Wakefulness* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux); a long poem titled *Girls on the Run* (also FSG) has just been published. DANIEL KANE is coordinator of WriteNet, Teachers & Writers' online forum. His poems have appeared in *Denver Quarterly*, *Exquisite Corpse*, and other journals.

dents through texts like *Beowulf* or Keats's “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and somehow everyone feels like they have to get something out of it. It's interesting to me that you started reading contemporary poetry first—maybe teachers should start with contemporary work as an introduction to poetry?

JA: I think that is the way one should begin. I read a lot of old-fashioned poetry when I was a child, chestnuts by Tennyson, Browning, and Rossetti—all their easier works. I enjoyed these, but they didn't make me particularly want to write poetry. It wasn't until I discovered the experimenting one could do with language in contemporary poetry that I began to want to emulate these modern poets. It all seemed very difficult to me when I first began reading it, especially Stevens, as it would to just about everybody when they first encounter modern poetry. My poetry now, too! It was fun working one's way into it, and trying to puzzle it all out, like mazes and mysteries.

DK: At least Wallace Stevens provides young readers with images like people dancing around jars on top of hills in Tennessee. This might be a way to get into such poetry—enjoying this surface level fun. Who was your favorite high school teacher? What did he or she do with poetry that you remember best?

JA: Well, I had a very nice teacher whose name was Miss Klumpp. She was helpful in getting me a little beyond the poetry in our textbook. My parents also happened to know a professor of literature at the University of Rochester, where my grandfather had been a professor. Her name was Katherine Koller. She first advised me that I should read a lot of Auden, so I did. I didn't really understand Auden much before then, although today he seems not to present that much difficulty in comparison with Stevens, for example. Auden's early poetry is much more obscure than his later poetry. I think he more or less disowned his early poetry which was about all he'd written when I began reading him. I've always been grateful to this professor for taking the time to kind of show me around the great twentieth century poets of the period.

DK: In “What Is Poetry” you write, “Trying to avoid / Ideas, as in this poem.” Is it possible to avoid ideas in poetry, and if so, what pleasures can the reader have as a result of this?

JA: When one goes at ideas directly, with hammer and tongs as it were, ideas tend to elude one in a poem. I think they only come back in when one pretends not to be paying any attention to them, like a cat that will rub against your leg.

DK: This makes me think about some student poetry I've read, in which students decide before they have put pens to

paper that they will absolutely write poems about, say, their fathers hitting them on the head. The results sometimes are rather predictable narrative poems that simply describe what happened, and petition the reader to feel sympathy. The potential to conceive of the poem as an unfolding or surprising realization of an idea can get lost through this process. I like your idea of beginning a poem without really knowing what's going to come out of it.

JA: Also, if you write about your father hitting you on the head, you're up against a lot of competition with people who are writing about exactly the same experience. I used to tell students not to use certain subjects they seemed to gravitate to almost automatically at their age, such as the death of their grandparents—grandparents tend to die when you're in high school or college. I at least want to read about something I don't already know about.

DK: Can you tell us a little bit about your process of composition for "What Is Poetry"? For example, we've got a "frieze of boy scouts from Nagoya." There is also a mysterious "they," in the lines "Now they / Will have to believe it / As we believed it."

JA: In my free-associating, I suddenly remembered visiting the town of Chester, England, which has ramparts all around it. I had a very cheap ticket that had to be used up within a few days, so my friend and I ran around the ramparts of Chester to get back to the station. We bumped into a lot of foreign boy scouts who impeded our trip. About the time I was writing this poem, I decided to go up to the top of the Empire State Building because it was a beautiful day and I hadn't done it in I don't know how long. The elevator was full of Japanese boy scouts with badges of the various cities they came from, one of them being Nagoya, a very large city in Japan. So those things got connected just because of one's automatic temptation to connect something with something else. "They / Will have to believe it / As we believed it"—at that point I switched to school, and "they" were the teachers, the authority figures. The thought got combed out at school, just as your mother used to comb your hair in the morning when you were running to catch the school bus. The teachers tried to make everything simple and understandable, by combing out the snarls in one's thinking.

DK: I'm glad you told us about the medieval town with the frieze of boy scouts from Nagoya, because learning that you basically made this image up out of a variety of events lets people know that they can make things up in poetry. This way, one knows one doesn't have to rely on fact all the time.

JA: I hope students already know that!

DK: I'm not so sure a lot of students do think that way. I remember having writing teachers bark out orders like "Write what you know!"

JA: But one doesn't know anything! That's the problem.

DK: Yes, that is the problem. I think orders like "Write what you know" get interpreted to mean "Write only what you've

actually experienced in real life in real time." It's nice to know from you that we can pick and choose among time, history, and imagination so that we can write a poem that sounds good and feels good.

JA: Well, I think one can, though not everybody would agree.

DK: If a teacher stopped you on the street one day and said, "Mr. Ashbery, whether you like it or not, I'm going to assign 'What is Poetry' to my high school students and tell them to write variations on it, help me find a way to do this," what would you say?

JA: I'd like to have a teacher assign a poem that would be variations on one of my poems. There would be no recipe for doing this—just free-associating, which is basically what I'm doing when I write. I use the poem as a sort of launching pad for free-associations.

DK: Can people still write about flowers without sounding flowery about it?

JA: I don't think there are any things that can't be written about in poetry—it all depends on how it's done. I don't know if I've succeeded in "What Is Poetry" in taking the curse off flowers. In fact, everybody likes flowers. Why not bring them into the room with the poem? That particular line "It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?" was something I overheard someone saying. I frequently incorporate overheard speech, which there's a lot of in New York City, much of which obviously doesn't make very much sense when overheard. But it obviously makes a lot of sense to the people who are talking. I overheard a boy saying that particular line to a girl in Brentano's bookshop where I was browsing. The "thin vertical path" would be what suddenly appeared in your eyes as you open them after looking at a broad field, and the line would be perhaps a trellis or the field about to flatten out again and burst into bloom. I also like it that the couple who were talking seemed to be lovers, so the line "It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?" seemed to have special meaning for them.

DK: I read "the thin vertical path" as representing predictable poetry. I thought you were making a funny kind of editorial comment on boring poetry—i.e., that it would give us the obvious, the "flowers" of conventional poetry.

JA: That's OK with me. It's OK to interpret poetry in a variety of ways. In fact, that's the only way poetry is read, I think. We all interpret poetry according to what we've experienced, therefore everybody's interpretation is going to differ from everybody else's.

DK: Are there such things as wrong interpretations, or do you distinguish more along the lines of imaginative interpretations versus dull, unenthusiastic interpretations?

JA: It depends on the reader. If the reader is bored by his or her interpretation, then I suppose it would be a boring interpretation. I don't think it's a question of being right or wrong.

DK: You ended "What Is Poetry" with a question mark. Are there any virtues in ending a poem with a question mark or some other sign of indeterminacy?

JA: I don't know that I would say there's a virtue connected with it, or that one should set out to end a poem with a question mark—I certainly didn't. I didn't know how it was going to end—I never do. But the question mark leaves things up in the air, as opposed to slamming the book shut and ending with an "experience" of the poem. I don't know whether I do it a great deal. I once read a poem by the nineteenth-century German poet Hölderlin, which ended with a comma. I thought that was a good idea, and I immediately stole it. This poem is in a collection called *Hymns and Fragments*, translated by Richard Sieburth.

DK: OK. Is there anything you want to add to our discussion of "What Is Poetry"?

JA: I wrote this poem and another one called "And 'Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name,'" both of which deal in a playful way with the nature of poetry. Right after I began teaching, when I was in my late forties, I wasn't used to students asking me "Why is this a poem?" or "Why isn't this a poem?" or "What are poems?" I never really thought about it—I'd just been writing poems all these years. So, from thinking about the nature of poetry came this admittedly slight and light partial answer to the question, "What is poetry?"



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