

1997

## A Spy in the House of the Thought Police

Kenneth Rosen

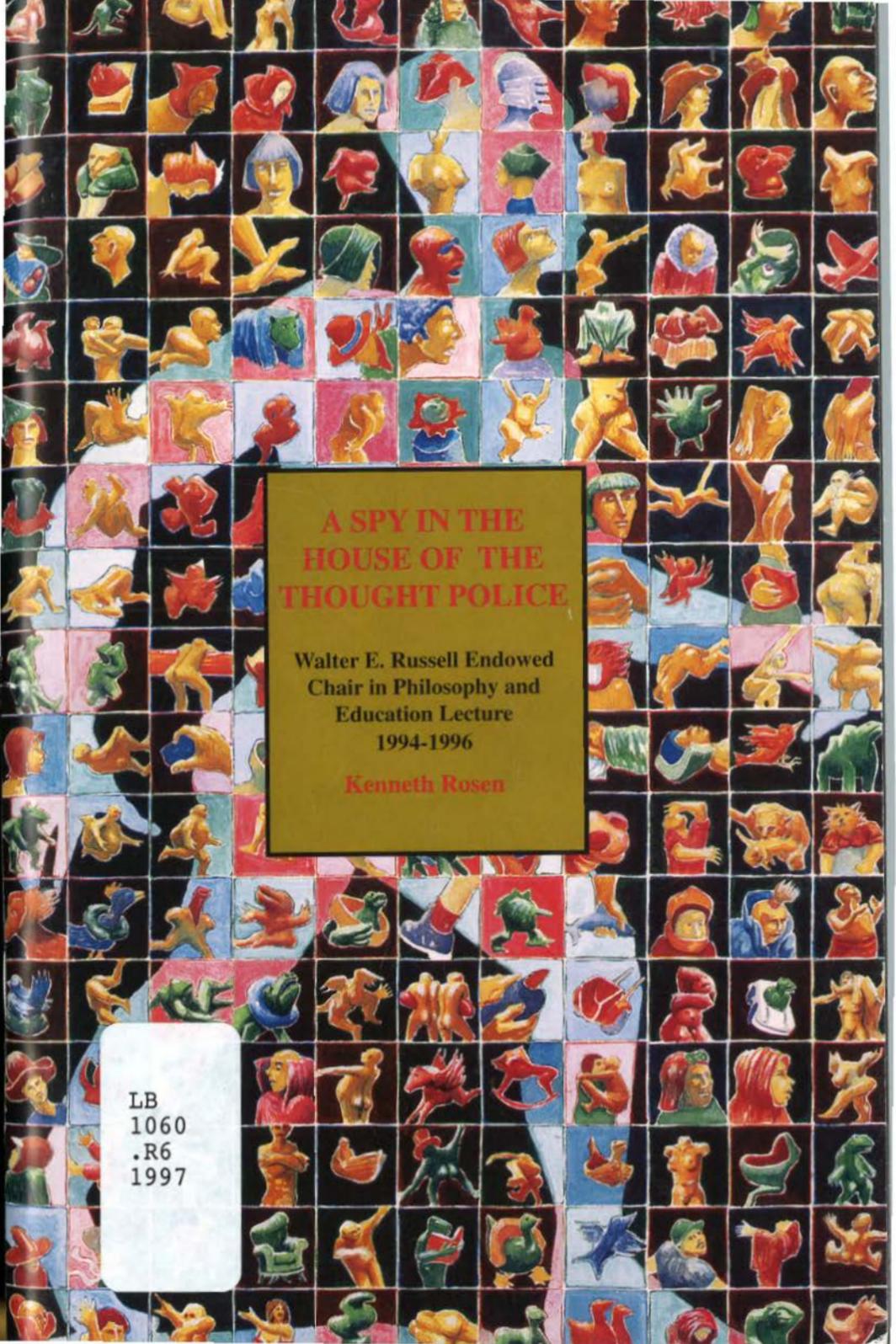
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**A SPY IN THE  
HOUSE OF THE  
THOUGHT POLICE**

Walter E. Russell Endowed  
Chair in Philosophy and  
Education Lecture  
1994-1996

**Kenneth Rosen**

LB  
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1997



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*Running Man*

 University of Southern Maine



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## PRELIMINARY IDEAS

M

Y theme as professor of the Russell Chair would be "The Outsider Inside the Academy." Like many of my students, I am the first member of my family to have a college degree. My stepfather was a factory worker, though also a community activist in behalf of senior citizens and the unemployed, and my mother was a hospital clerk who became, at the end of her working career, an administrator. I am also a poet, and thus committed to professing and practicing the terms of an art that is ignored, misunderstood, and distrusted, when not aggressively derided and disliked. Standing before a class of students to teach a poem, I could liken myself to Coleridge's Ancient Mariner interfering with a wedding guest advancing on the food and festivities to tell an endlessly lugubrious tale of a dead albatross and miseries endured on frozen seas. By the time he's done, the poem itself is an albatross he's hung on the neck of the wedding guest, while inside the dancers are tired and the food is cold. To hang the albatross of the poem upon the necks of my students, I have always believed in the importance of my being effectively and genuinely dramatic, and I believe the extent to which I've succeeded in being dramatic derives from the way I've renewed, sustained and displayed, like the Ancient Mariner, my original status as an outsider to Maine, my profession, and my art.

Sometimes I've told my students that the archetype governing our classroom transaction was the same covenant of terror and salvation depicted by Abraham and Isaac in *The Book of Genesis*, that I was Abraham, they collectively and individually were Isaac, and that the literary text in question was the ram trapped in thicket branches as if provided by Jehovah. My classroom podium was the long-stained sacrificial rock, and it inspired, without my even displaying the knife blade of analytic dissection, an atmosphere of appropriate pity and awe. I offered this as an explanation for the crescent of empty classroom chairs that invariably surrounds the professor's desk. I've argued that each word of a literary text was

necessarily dramatic, and that my task was to be the intermediary and bridge of drama between them and the text itself, the instrument of rescue from the incomprehension and fear I myself had provoked.

In a lecture on the originary archetypes of poetic practice, Johns Hopkins professor and poet Allen Grossman, citing Orpheus and Philomela, notes further the etymological relationship of the word *orphan* and the name Orpheus, and how Orpheus's power to arrest attention with description derives from his condition of being so terribly bereft of his beloved. Examples of archetypal outsiders acquiring heroic and prophetic authority from their status abound in Western literature, and as Russell Chair I would like to explore the literary and philosophic basis for how thinking and professing thought become a solitary's alternative to community for the ultimate benefit of the community.

2 But in addition to archetypal theories of professorial and poetic authority, I am interested in the renewed importance poetry in particular has come to enjoy as a refuge for a felt sense of individual dignity in this particular phase of social and political democracy, as well as commodity capitalism. As a poet and professor I'm anxious to consider not only the phenomena of rap music, poetry slams, and poetry readings on MTV, but also the poem as therapeutic instrument of the homeless, the terminally ill, and the physically and sexually abused. Many fundamental aspects of this issue were explored in a book length essay by Robert Penn Warren, *Democracy and Poetry*, nearly two decades ago. In recent years, feminist, Third-World, and Eastern European poets have demonstrated the critical function of the poem in resisting social, political, and economic oppression, while rhetorical theorists, such as Kenneth Burke and Stanley Fish, have raised troubling questions about intentionality in language that challenge the commonplaces of both our pedagogy and practice. The paradoxes of poetry and popular usage were explored by the social theorists associated with the Frankfurt School, notably Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. My interest in responding to my nomination to the Russell Chair would be to explore philosophic and educational issues that revolve around my work as a poet and professor in public lectures. I would certainly illustrate the issues I'd raise with examples from poetry, and possibly with some of my own.



## PERSONAL STATEMENT

I have always considered myself an outsider in the academy, a Pennsylvania poet at Gorham State College and then the University of Southern Maine. From the terms of my circumstances, belief in the academy's goals, and from fairly desperate personal necessity, which I'll try to suggest in the narrative that follows, I forged a role for myself—as an academic leader, professor and writer—that has enabled me to inspire, encourage, entertain, and befriend USM's unusual amalgam of students and faculty, often themselves desperate and discouraged outsiders for whom the institution's committed struggle with idealism and practicality represented what appeared their last or only chance.

3 In September 1965, the first fall I taught at Gorham State College, my first and primary teaching appointment, I volunteered to help Ted Fish, now a retired USM professor of mathematics, coach the men's cross-country team. I was an instructor in English. I taught two sections of College Writing, then a yearlong course, and two sections of American Literature Survey, from before the Revolution to the present day. American Lit. Survey was required by state law. Weekdays after classes Ted Fish and I jogged a mile or two together, out Flaggy Meadow Road and back on Rt. 25; or through the wooded hills behind Alden Pond to Lover's Lane, up Cressey Road, then back on Rt. 25. The team ran or jogged four or five miles more. Weekends our caravan of cars drove to running meets elsewhere in Maine and northern New England. On trips to Littleton, New Hampshire, or Johnson, Vermont, I saw for the first time the White Mountains and in Pinkham Notch the Appalachian Mountain Club Base Camp at the foot of Mt. Washington. I was annoyed at not knowing what the Base Camp was, or how to assess the mountains. Driving to Presque Isle or Machias, Ted Fish, who came from Jonesboro, pointed out where the white pine of southern Maine gave way to the fir and spruce of the northern forests. Unable to see what I didn't know, it had all been hitherto an unpleasant blur.

As an unofficial running coach, I came to know the northern New England region, Mainers, and my students, in ways that informed my life for the next twenty-eight years. That spring, again as faculty volunteer, I constituted and coached a Gorham State College track team, soliciting team members from my classes: "Anybody here do track in high school?" We got permission to practice at Gorham High School two afternoons a week, but mostly we jogged out Flaggy Meadow Road for conditioning, relying on skills developed in high school and abandoned because Gorham State, the college of expedience, had lacked a track team as well as a track. We never won a track meet, but did win New England State College championships in the mile, two-mile, and high jump. Peter Davis of Fryeburg set a conference high jump record that stood for over ten years. He went to Viet Nam and flew helicopters, and returned to Gorham in the chaotic early 70s to complete his degree. He last wrote me from Oregon in 1980, to congratulate me for breaking three hours in the Casco Bay Marathon.

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In 1965, during that first year, I startled the college administration by inaugurating a Thursday night Foreign Film Series, ordering a dozen films from the Audio-Visual Aids center and locating a projectionist, also from within my classes. I printed, and my students distributed, mimeographed fliers. The film series lasted for approximately twenty-five years. At that time there were no foreign films shown in greater Portland, let alone on TV. In the spring, with some money from the Cultural Affairs Committee, I invited a half-dozen area poets to read at a poetry festival, and had the print shop in the Industrial Arts Building print a book of their poems. Also that fall I taught a graduate course in Modern American Literature, primarily to area high school teachers, and offered a similar course that spring. For the next fifteen years, my teaching load was five courses a semester. I secured a literary agent in New York City and eventually sent off ten short stories. None were ever accepted for publication, and eventually the agency dropped me. I began mailing poems to little magazines in alphabetical order, and my first accepted poem was reprinted in *The Best American Poems* 1967.

For most of my classroom students, teaching in the public schools was a career choice of expedience and psychological resignation. This resignation made it virtually impossible to spark the excitement about literary modernism in poetry and fiction I needed

to convey in my classes to believe I was alive. I was born in Boston and grew up in Philadelphia. I thought of my sensibility and cultural referents as urban. Maine was unknown to me, provincial and alien. It sounds trivial, but I was traumatized by the overwhelming number of my male students who in dress situations, with dark trousers, wore white cotton socks. Coaching cross-country and track enabled me to learn about my students, how to motivate them and foster community goals and pride, which I was laboring to create in the classroom. Foreign films and poetry readings constituted an exterior context for the cultural community and site of learning I was striving to invent.

Once I dropped out of engineering at Penn State, I was a desultory and distracted undergraduate student, notorious among my friends as a poet. But at the huge Iowa Writers' Workshop program, I had worked my way into the inner circle of the most promising student writers. I thought Maine was the end of the world and that my career had hit the rocks. I was soon smoking two packs of cigarettes a day, and my weight ballooned to over 230 pounds, despite my coaching and casual jogging. I began running seriously the following year, which enabled me to coordinate quitting cigarettes, professorial pipes, and fatman cigars, and losing weight. It gave me the stamina I needed to make up for my educational deficiencies, teach exhilarating classes, and build a career as a writer that could give me the professional flexibility I'd need to escape—namely from Maine, where I felt like Arthur Rimbaud, one-legged and dying in Ethiopia after a brilliant career as *enfant terrible* of poetic modernism in Paris, France, who wrote to his sister, "Tomorrow you will be in the light, and I in darkness." Unlike Rimbaud, I had no brilliant career to look back on. But every year I've taught at USM, I've created a new booklist for virtually each one of my courses. I teach four courses a semester, which has often entailed four preparations, and I have written and published steadily.

In 1967 I went to the MLA meeting in New York City to rendezvous with a number of my Iowa writing friends and look for a better job. It was the beginning of the bad decade for jobs in literature and the humanities. That fall I had bought a backpack and sleeping bag, and hiking boots from the Peter Limmer shop in Intervale, New Hampshire, and had begun climbing in the White Mountains, sleeping on the floor of Adirondack shelters on Kins-

man Ridge and so forth. In New York City I never scheduled an interview. I listened to the tales of my friends and decided I liked what I was doing in New England. I returned to Falmouth Foreside, where I lived with my Iowa wife and Maine son, and since then have never seriously considered leaving my adopted state or USM position. In a few years I published my first book of poetry, *Whole Horse*, nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, and having met the English novelist Penelope Mortimer at Yaddo, the Saratoga Springs artists' colony, I took my family to a house of hers in the south of England for the rest of my sabbatical.

My next sabbatical was in 1980, when with the encouragement of Helen Greenwood, I founded the Stonecoast Writers' Conference, which I directed for the next dozen years. For about ten years I trained with enough regularity to run four or five marathons every year, backing off when I began to worry I was not investing my poetry with sufficient intensity. Carolyn Chute, my student throughout the 70s, wrote a novel, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, which established her as an international figure. I served as chair of the English Department for four years, and tried to advance its evolution from embattled and divided notoriety. In 1985 I was named a Local Hero by *New England Monthly* magazine. A year later I was invited to teach in the remarkable M.F.A. faculty at Warren Wilson College, which has included many of this country's most honored and accomplished writers. In 1989 I won the Distinguished Faculty Award at USM, and in 1990 I was invited to be acting director of Creative Writing and Visiting Professor of English at Syracuse University. This year I was asked to serve, along with professors from Dartmouth and University of Vermont, as well as the editor and publisher of the Ecco Press, to serve on the awards panel in poetry of the Massachusetts Arts Council.

Though I have drafted and many times rewritten a novel, for the most part I've concentrated on writing poetry, winning the Maine Arts Commission Chapbook competition in 1989 and the following year a Pushcart Prize for a poem from it, "Castrato." Recently I've been trying to revive my skills as a short story writer, and last year I won the *Casco Bay Weekly* fiction contest. This year I was again a contest finalist. My c.v. lists my professional accomplishments and service, but I hope the preceding narrative suggests the life I constructed to profess literary possibilities and

texts (or more simply writing and reading), with maximum intensity, day after day, in my classroom, which is my life's center. My pride is in the success of my students and in the excitement I generate in the classroom. My other honors and publications, my poems and stories, my recent essay on Wallace Stevens and talk on Stevens delivered at a professional conference, were achieved as the result of sustained struggle. These too afford satisfactions, but they are more matter-of-fact.



## RUSSELL CHAIR ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

**I**want to read a poem by a namesake Kenneth Koch called "Thank You," and say a few words about Kenneth Koch and the poem, but first I must say thank you in my own voice to President Pattenaudd for his confidence in permitting me this extraordinary honor; to Dave Davis, with whom I corresponded last spring about the Russell Chair; to the people who wrote in my support, Dick Maiman, Tim Wooten, and Carolyn Chute; and thanks of course to the selection committee and to all of you, colleagues, students, and friends—which of course I don't mean as separate categories—thank you for being here this afternoon.

8 "Thank You" by Kenneth Koch was published in 1962, the year I graduated from college. (I was born the year Walter E. Russell retired as principal of Gorham State Normal School in 1940—he was at Gorham for 46 years, 35 as its principal, and when principal emeritus he served several terms in the State Legislature.) Koch's "Thank You" is a marginally impolite, though not rude, insouciant poem, one that you're going to feel is being done to you as well as possibly done for you, a slyly aggressive and slightly transgressive poem. Koch, along with John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara, were the prominent figures of what was known in the 70s as the New York School of Poetry, identified with mannered, cosmopolitan or deliberately stupid poems indifferent to your comfort. Koch in those days was the only educator of the three poets, a professor at Columbia, and in the late 60s and early 70s Koch was the driving force behind a program called Poets-in-the-Schools, which I participated in twenty-five years ago—driving from Gorham to Sanford High School for ten sessions to talk about poetry and being a poet. Poets-in-the-Schools evolved into the artist-in-residence programs state arts commissions administer across the country to this day.

What I'm sharing with you is the common knowledge of people like myself, working and teaching poets—it is our shoptalk and

gossip. Koch wrote about his proselytizing for poetry in several books, *Wishes, Lies and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* (in 1970), *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?: Teaching Great Poetry to Children* (in 1973), and *I Never Told Anybody: Teaching Poetry Writing in a Nursing Home* (in 1977). His work is continued by an outfit in New York City called the Writers' & Teachers' Collaborative, of which I think he's a trustee.

One could argue that the insouciance and aggression I'm claiming for Koch's poem, the ambiguous chip on its shoulder, reflects the same sense of poetry being imperiled and neglected that drove Koch's efforts to teach poetry. But that's not my point. My point is that you can be a provocative and consummate wise-guy in one area, and passionately productive in another, and that this is not an anomaly, irregularity, or even a paradox, but is often a dialectic crucial to human vitality and the construction of a social culture that truly honors human vitality and allows it to flower. And that is what we're doing here. So don't be frightened, nervous, or restless. In this poem the island is a classroom, and the battleship is the university, which is also an elephant stopover in Zambezi.

### Thank You

9  
Oh thank you for giving me the chance  
Of being ship's doctor! I am sorry that I shall have to refuse—  
But, you see, the most I know of medicine is orange flowers  
Tilted in the evening light against a cashmere red  
Inside which breasts invent the laws of light  
And of night, where cashmere moors itself across the sea.  
And thank you for giving me these quintuplets  
To rear and make happy . . . My mind was on something else.

Thank you for giving me this battleship to wash,  
But I have a rash on my hands and my eyes hurt,  
And I know so little about cleaning a ship  
That I should rather clean an island.  
There one knows what one is about—sponge those palm trees,  
sweep up the sand a little, polish those coconuts;  
Then take a rest for a while and it's time to trim the grass as well as  
separate it from each other where gummy substances have made  
individual blades stick together, forming an ugly bunch;

And then take the dead bark off the trees, and perfume these  
islands a bit with a song. . . . That's easy—but a battleship!  
Where does one begin and how does one do? to batten the hatches?  
I would rather clean a million palm trees.

Now here comes an offer of a job for setting up a levee  
In Mississippi. No thanks. Here it says *Rape or Worse*. I think  
they must want me to publicize this book.  
On the jacket it says "Published in Boothbay Harbor, Maine"—  
what a funny place to publish a book!  
I suppose it is some provincial publishing house  
Whose provincial pages emit the odor of sails  
And the freshness of the sea  
Breeze. . . . But publicity!  
The only thing I could publicize well would be my tooth,  
Which I could say came with my mouth and in a most engaging  
manner  
With my whole self, my body and including my mind,  
Spirits, emotions, spiritual essences, emotional substances,  
poetry, dreams, and lords  
Of my life, everything, all embraceleted with my tooth  
In a way that makes one wish to open the windows and scream  
"Hi!" to the heavens,  
And "Oh, come and take me away before I die in a minute!"

It is possible that the dentist is smiling, that he dreams of extrac-  
tion  
Because he believes that the physical tooth and the spiritual tooth  
are one.

Here is another letter, this one from a textbook advertiser;  
He wants me to advertise a book on chopping down trees  
But how could I? I love trees! and I haven't the slightest sympa-  
thy with chopping them down, even though I know  
We need their products for wood-fires, some house, and maple  
syrup—  
Still I like trees better  
In their standing condition, when they sway at the beginning of  
evening. . . .  
And thank you for the pile of driftwood.  
Am I wanted at the sea?

And thank you for the chance to run a small hotel  
In an elephant stopover in Zambezi,  
But I do not know how to take care of guests, certainly they  
would all leave soon  
After seeing blue lights out the windows and rust on their iron  
beds—I'd rather own a bird-house in Jamaica:  
Those people come in, the birds, they do not care how things are  
kept up. . . .  
It's true that Zambezi proprietorship would be exciting, with  
people getting off elephants and coming into my hotel,  
But as tempting as it is I cannot agree.  
And thank you for this offer of the post of referee  
For the Danish wrestling championship—I simply do not feel  
qualified. . . .

But the fresh spring air has been swabbing my mental decks  
Until, although prepared for fight, still I sleep on land.  
Thank you for the ostriches. I have not yet had time to pluck  
them,  
But I am sure they will be delicious, adorning my plate at sunset,  
My tremendous plate, and the plate  
Of the offers to all my days. But I cannot fasten my exhilaration  
to the sun.

And thank you for the evening of the night on which I fell off my  
horse in the shadows. That was really useful.

(From *Thank you and Other Poems* by Kenneth Koch, Grove Press, Inc.,  
New York, 1962)



## RECOGNITION DAY 1995

I hope Judy Potter, who besides being associate provost of the University is a professor of law, won't go away, because I want to say a few words about law and lawyers, and about the similarities and differences of a law professor and poetry professor in their perspectives on the possibilities of language. I also have a poem I want to read to you called "Paradise Lost." I don't mean the long one, but it's about leaving the Garden of Eden, which USM, your alma mater, has sought, in all earnest modesty, to replicate for you.

12 Meanwhile, and first of all, congratulations! In the words of the great German poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "*Wer immer strebend sich bemüht, Den können wir erlösen.*" Or, "He who forever strives upward, him can we save," and you have striven, though it is clear that if Goethe, who lived from 1749 to 1832, enjoyed the bouquets and cornucopias of enlightenment that have befallen us a century or so later and a mere five years from the second whole millennium, his poem would have said, "He and she who forever strive upward, they can be saved." The line comes near the end of his great poem *Faust*, and if you are troubled by a sense that my 20th century transversion conveys the slightly ludicrous, distracting and salacious suggestion that he and she are striving together in an ungainly and properly private pursuit of salvation, let me tell you this: the last lines of Goethe's *Faust* are as follows: "*Das Ewig-Weiblich/Zieht uns hinan,*" or "The Eternal-Feminine/lures men to perfection."

Well, here at the end of the 20th century, we're also fully aware that putting the Eternal-Feminine on a pedestal has its downside, and is not to be indulged lightly or unadvisedly. Be that as it may, we are gathered here to put all of you on a pedestal, and we do so neither lightly nor unadvisedly. The English version of those closing lines of *Faust*, written by Christopher Marlowe, he who died

after being stabbed in the eye in barroom dispute with another man over his male lover, goes like this:

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,  
And burned is Apollo's laurel bough,  
That sometimes grew within this learned man.  
Faustus is gone: regard his hellish fall,  
Whose fiendish fortune may exhort the wise,  
Only to wonder at unlawful things  
Whose deepness does entice such forward wits  
To practise more than heavenly power permits.

Marlowe's Faustus goes straight to hell. So there you have it, "Strive forever upward," but don't "Practise more than heavenly power permits."

One of my most difficult tasks as a poetry professor is to persuade my students that poetry luxuriates in one of the inescapable realities of our being, moral and intentional contradiction and ambiguity. Thus Wallace Stevens, my favorite American poet, wrote in an essay on poetic nobility: "The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truths that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them." He says further, "I am evading a definition. If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. As in the case of an external thing, nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix it is to put an end to it."

Wallace Stevens failed twice in private practice as a lawyer—he was a big man, nicknamed the Giant, and his contemporaries described a dangerous love of jokes and a gargoyle grin that did not inspire confidence in clients who thought they had a lot to lose. He went to work for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company as a bonding and contract lawyer, and he was not promoted to vice president for 18 years, or until he was 55, which is a long time to wait for the business world's equivalent of academic tenure.

It might appear strange for a lawyer to declare his love in language for that which is unfixed. One would think that law uses language to define, stipulate, and establish clear and stable distinctions. Yet although a lawyer must argue for the possibility of definition, lawyers would hardly be bringing issues to court if there wasn't a pervasive aspect of law, legal language, and all human events that is eternally ambiguous, "an unalterable vibration" that lawyers are hoping a judge and jury will provisionally resolve. Laws are political compromises forged by legislatures. That's why it's so hard to make sense of them, and why we need law professors. Legislatures are always reconvening to review, revise, or pass new laws in an effort to get it right, but never once and for all. Congress never goes home for good. So what is it that poets do, I wonder. Make an effort to get it wrong, and call this delicious? Maybe so. Everything about poetry is perverse. Metaphors combine opposites or remote things and claim to describe: a daffodil is a trumpet, for example. Irony tells the truth by lying.

As a contract lawyer and poet, Stevens took an interest in a related peculiarity of language concentrated in certain words called contranymy, words that mean what they say and also the opposite of what they say, such as *dust*, as when you dust the furniture or dust the tomatoes, or *forge*, as when you forge a law or forge a signature. Zip Kellogg, our reference librarian, found a bunch of these for me: everybody knows *cleave*, but how about *bolt* (does it mean *fasten* securely or *run away*), or *scan* (does it mean an intent or casual perusal), or *fast* (does it mean that a boat is speedy, or tied in place). When we temper steel we make it harder; when we temper justice we make it softer. Sanguine means both cheerful and murderous. Moot means both arguable and no longer arguable. Ravel and unravel are impossible; both mean to separate, yet their mutual existence suggests either means the opposite.

Stanley Fish, Renaissance scholar and probably the most prominent literary theorist in the country, claims that if this ambiguity wasn't inherent in all language, we wouldn't be able to talk to each other, that all communication is the agreement to disagree, and Stanley Fish, because of his interest in these issues, has arranged for himself to become, at Duke University, a professor of law and literature. Still it makes us nervous—it seems almost fiendish—to be told that language doesn't stipulate anything. What kind of pledge can we find then in the words, "I love you"? A

frightening one, and we already know that, though we do our best to pasteurize or domesticate it, or claim that the boring has become interesting because the interesting has become so boring, and we don't make this pledge lightly or unadvisedly, and sometimes when someone offers it to us, we want to run away, or have to, when someone asks us, by saying this, to bite the Forbidden Apple of the Tree of Knowledge, like a lover or a teacher, especially a poetry professor, or like Faustus craving a kiss from Helen of Troy and damned to hell in Marlowe's version, or like a snake in the Garden of Eden, which brings me to my poem, "Paradise Lost," which I hope makes a nice impression on you.

### Paradise Lost

"I love you," said God, and there was a garden,  
And we were naked and sweet, without a single  
Hungry need. Of course there was a forbidden tree,  
And a supine vein of our animal nature  
That called itself modesty and called attention  
To the tree's fruits and juices a necessary bravery.  
The idea was to hold the apple in your lips  
Without breaking its skin with your teeth  
Or eating its meat. Even the Devil  
Said eating the meat was death and madness.  
The trick was to flirt and tease forever for paradise.  
Eve ate first. God was watching. Did we want Eden  
Or reality? Was there ever a choice? Not after  
Eve began to bleed. Now it was up to Adam.  
Would he go along with her travail and woe,  
Or take a walk and lie down awhile under  
A more innocent bush? "Pass me the apple,"  
He told her, "I'm going with you," and together  
They left the lovely garden of our origin  
And entered the good and the badlands  
Of our history. In another version  
Of their story, Adam eats the apple first,  
And says, "Look at me and hold still  
In your heart and body." Eve resisted wildly,  
Laughing and dancing, acting crazy, and then  
She yielded, out of breath, taking the air  
From his mouth and his tongue, and everything

Became real. "I love you," I said,  
And I saw an angel with a sword of fire  
Barring our path. Sometimes it happens  
That way too, and Eden or earth, Heaven  
Or Hell, we never can tell where we are.

(From *No Snake, No Paradise*, The Ascensius Press, Portland, ME. 1996.  
First published in the *Beloit Poetry Journal*.)



## A SPY IN THE HOUSE OF THE THOUGHT POLICE

**M**Y talk is called "A Spy in the House of the Thought Police," and at the outset, I'd like to say a few words about my title, invoking the spirit of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in his remarkable and extensive preface to *The Phenomenology of Mind*, where he laments how inescapably "an obscurity is thrown over the point of issue in the knowledge of the truth." None of us, in other words, including Hegel and myself, wishes to be understood too easily. "Thought police" refers to the academy in its role in implementing public standards of order, knowledge, and practice. I don't intend a critique of these things, such critiques being a commonplace of our collegiality, the stale jokes of our always dwindling but stubbornly earnest complacency. Our academy, however, is also custodian and sanctuary for what is beleaguered by the very social standards it serves, namely our undefined, yet strongly felt individualism, our radical ineluctable selfhood, and as I approach my presentation, I'd prefer that none of us be certain that I myself, Kenneth Frederick Tyson Rosen, am the spy to which my title refers. I'm not denying this, but my talk is concerned with the mutual benefits of uncertainty, and I hope to serve us all by saying I'd rather complicate than dissipate my cover or disguises, or explode yours, in reaffirming equivocation and our equivocal statuses and arrangements. Otherwise, I will preface my remarks by apologizing for their informal character. I always knew that my talk would be personal, but I thought that my subject was going to be "Irony in Literature," the deliberate misrepresentation of intention and essence, especially in poetry, which I like to read and write. I thought I could explain that people dislike poetry, especially when obliged to respond to it in a formal setting like a classroom, because it impresses them as doubletalk, unpleasantly sly and superior. Why should they be held responsible and graded for doubletalk? I was going to concede that poetry was doubletalk, but that doubletalk was a veil behind which one could pursue crucial

pleasures and consolations. I was going to offer myself as living evidence of a happy and unhappy liar, and argue that Irony, which derives from the Greek word *iron*, or slave, provides a critical ground for subjective freedom, for being a spy amid thought police, for offering information of uncertain worth on an uncertain basis, an abyss of resistance to verification, for a mutual reward whose value often appears to reside primarily in the assertion of its value, as occurs in courtship. Perhaps I intuited that I could say all I needed to say about Irony, that it is distrusted by authoritarian personalities, people who enslave or are most content enslaved, in a preface, which is invariably framed after, not before, the face has been constructed, make-up applied after the face itself, for better or worse, has already been made. My talk turned out to be about what resides behind Irony, subjectivity itself, by which I mean the self locating itself in a condition aggressively susceptible to inflection, able therein to collect and focus all the illusions and modalities of felt individuation, an experience primarily of mind discovering itself in an idea, and an idea that becomes a woman. These views of subjectivity are variations on Nietzschean propositions about thought and its human history, which I encountered during my tenure as holder of the Russell Chair of Philosophy and Education, and I want to express my gratitude to the descendants of Walter E. Russell, my University, and my fellow faculty and student supporters, for making possible this occasion for reflection on my encounter with these powerful ideas. It's a wonderful thing to have a two-year allowance to buy books one might not otherwise buy or ever read, to be entrusted and charged to think and speak. Allen Grossman, a poet I'll cite in the body of my talk, opens his so-called "Primer of the Commonplaces of Speculative Poetics," by asserting that "The function of poetry is to obtain for everybody one kind of success at the limits of the autonomy of will." Later he concedes that "poetry makes promises to everybody and keeps its promises only to some." The poet, he observes in a poem, is an affront to "the scarcity of fame," and since I've been acknowledging the demise of Irony as my theme, I would like to conclude this preface by reading from the sixth and last section of Grossman's poem "The Slave," itself prefaced by words from the Second Book of Samuel: "And the angel of the Lord was by the threshingplace of Araunah the Jebusite."

Every nation has an angel. Most are pale;  
And stand in their killing clothes night and day.  
The angel of Jerusalem is pale,

and stands  
At the highest pinnacle of the threshing  
Rock teaching curses to the sinister farmer,  
Jerusalem,

as the sun rises. The wind shifts to  
The South, and begins to sort the night's threshing,  
"This to life, and this other to the fire."

I do not study with the aim of saying  
Trivial things.—If the angel of Jerusalem  
Had human eyes. . .

If Jerusalem were a pool  
Where a very beautiful girl might walk or sit,  
As she pleased, or bathe. . . If the angel of  
Jerusalem had ears for the light blue eloquence  
Of water. . .

But Jerusalem is a slave.  
My left hand signs—"Death"; the right makes its mark.

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I will now begin by reading a short poem in German, as I promised the Austrian-born representative of the Russell family two years ago, when I was installed as the Russell Chair. My German is inadequate and bastardized, but not entirely bogus. It mirrors our eternal and recurring relationship with every philosophic and literary absolute. Here's the poem:

### Der Rauch

Das kleine Haus unter Bäumen am See.  
Vom Dach steigt Rauch.  
Fehlte er  
Wie trostlos dan wären  
Haus, Bäume und See.

An infinitely interesting little item, endearing, severely spare, and yet repetitive: as if affirming a truth by the nodding of the head. Soon I'll attempt to enhance appreciation of the poem by

reading a translation of it in English. I'll describe who wrote the poem, explain why I think the poet is exemplary, and comment on the poem's meaning. By deferring all this, I demonstrate the parallel, if not precisely the relationship, between pedagogy and striptease: you know something is there from my fervent if imperfect German; the tremolo of urgency in my voice corresponds to a dancer's sway; we all know why we're here; I have promised to reveal that which resides in my power to reveal. This moment of synthetic uncertainty, this provisional space or presence of insolence, or at least insouciance, this half-unserious threat that I won't reveal what I hope you want, is important to the structure of everything I wish to discuss: philosophy, literature, and pedagogy, including this particular German poem. I could be holding a stack of blank pages. These were at one time a stack of blank pages. This top hat, the Russell Chair of Philosophy and Education, from which I've promised to magically extract a rabbit or a dove, may contain nothing but hot air, and it does: "*Der Rauch*" means "The Smoke." My translation goes like this:

The little house among trees by the lake.  
From the roof smoke rises.  
Without it  
How dreary would be  
House, trees and lake.

We can start with the truism, *Where there is smoke, there is fire*, and we know everything that fire implies: acceleration of change; heat and comfort; anger; devastation; loss; but above all, as the poem itself so tersely suggests, that most elusive and valuable thing, the human.

The author of the poem was the famous playwright Bertolt Brecht, a Marxist if not precisely a Communist, who left Nazi Germany for Hollywood, and after a decade of productivity and provocation, left America during the McCarthy period, returning to Communist East Berlin in 1949. He died in 1956, at the age of 58, three years older than I am right now. He is most famous for his collaborations with the composer Kurt Weill, with whom he created "The Threepenny Opera." It featured the big hit, "Mack the Knife," or "Mackie Messer," which you may have heard sung by Frank Sinatra or Louis Armstrong. I remember it as sung by Kurt Weill's wife, Lotte Lenya. When she was 80 years old, many

years a widow, she married an 18-year-old male dancer. I was in graduate school at the University of Iowa, so it was roughly 1963 when Lotte Lenya left America by ship with her young husband for a Bavarian honeymoon and to reside in East Germany. The newlyweds were intercepted by the press. A reporter asked why she was marrying an 18-year-old-boy. Lenya evidently turned her head a hundred-and-eighty degrees to gaze with her jumbo black-olive eyes upon her interlocutor before answering: "Becoss vee ahr een luff."

Love cuts through everything. It is not the intellectual property, *raison d'être*, or exclusive rationale of poets, but also of 80-year-old women with hoarse singing voices. Unlike sex, and our multiple variations thereon, love seems to be the closest thing we know to be an unnatural sin. It's not entirely unechoed, of course, in the natural or animal world, where parricide, infanticide, cannibalism, and every imaginable deviation of sexual satisfaction proliferate indefinitely, or naturally. Love isn't a human monopoly, but it successfully monopolizes us, and contributes to our extraordinary capacity for worry and introspection that eventually distinguished us from chimpanzees, those closest of animal relatives, with whom we share 97 percent of our chromosomes, and whose odd call, the pant-hoot, has been interpreted by animal ethologists, such as Jane Goodall and Konrad Lorenz, to mean: "I am here. Where are you?" Love is infinite, arbitrary, and besides potentially totalizing devotion and sacrifice, it eludes certainty, limit, definition. It's like smoke. There's a fire at one end, and at the other a gorgeous but painful, liberating, and restlessly incomplete dissipation. It is a field, or ground, in which the self experiences its capacity for being, primarily in terms of itself, and I hope this sounds familiar. I have to say that my ideas about subjectivity, or love as a sovereign subjectivity, are at least two hundred years old, articulated initially by such German romantics as Schelling and Schlegel. This is a concession, not a claim to authority.

In the photograph of Bertolt Brecht that constitutes my image of him, he is slender, crew-cut, wearing a belted, black-leather trench coat, and holding a large lighted cigar. He is beringed, it would seem, with diamonds and gold, and smiling with unpleasantly bad teeth. Brecht was a Marxist with a weakness for showgirls, someone who was conscious of two conflicting regimes of pleasure, or contrary economies of value, and in his poetry and theater

he derided as hollow and hypocritical the puritanism or piety of any correctness that denied the reality of one or the other, of communal nostalgia and decency, and individualizing consumption, cruelty, and greed. His smile asked, like Shakespeare, four hundred years before: "And do you think because you are virtuous there will be no more cakes and ales?" And his smile answered, as well as his overcoat, his cigar, and his rings: "Liebchen, there will be a whole lot more cakes and ales." I'll read "The Smoke" once more, in English:

The little house among trees by the lake.  
From the roof smoke rises.  
Without it  
How dreary would be  
House, trees and lake.

22 Brecht's theory of "epic theater" dispensed with Aristotelian principles of unity, or what we think of as continuity of time, narrative or story line, theme, and physical space. A play became a series of loosely connected scenes, using songs to comment on the action: "Oh the shark has pretty teeth, dear," and so forth. A post-Aristotelian concept of unity could translate into a pedagogic, social, and literary practice as a sort of falling upward through an open door, saying "Oops, hello," as if a clumsy, unpredictable bear, superficially harmless, were conveying to you an important purpose: Help me be myself and to feel valuable. On your guard, but mother me. "*Mère pleure, moi je pense,*" wrote Stephane Mallarme. Mother weep while I think.

I wrote my first poem when I was a junior in college. I remember the time because I remember the place, my room at the back of a third floor, three-room flat a mile from the Penn State campus, on Rt. 422 to Boalsburg and beyond, the Nittany Mountains, Harrisburg, the Pennsylvania Turnpike. The room was pink. Its ceilings sloped with the roof. Pie-wedge windows faced Rt. 422, casements that opened inwardly. A dormer overlooked the elderberry bushes that framed the side lawn and crescent driveway three floors down. If I didn't remember the place, I wouldn't remember the time, or say that it was 1961. The hours of day, between midnight and 3:00 a.m. have nothing to do with this. I can remember them, and my elated fatigue, with adequate precision, even if I couldn't

remember the year. A sense of self is serenely continuous and undifferentiated, or else it is marked unsystematically, more often by traumas than triumphs. I remember when I learned to read, when I learned to ride a bicycle, and when I wrote my first poem, but not with a socially calibrated chronology. By remembering the places, or by imaging, I can calculate 1944 and 1949. This lack of congruence between personal and social systems, whether of time, psychology, or anything else, touches a tacit network of contradictions to which we all refer for the titillating awe, pity, and embarrassing pleasures of our popular entertainment.

Teaching García Márquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, I interpreted the title, for myself and my students, as a succinct critique of industrial civilization: the consequence of linear time, systematically calibrated, was solitude, or deprivation of communal comfort, in which time was seasonal and circular. The novel itself is related circularly. Standing before a firing squad, the victim recollects with extraordinary intensity a life teeming with passions, reversals, and exaltations which are the complete opposite of solitude. Returning to the scene of Colonel Aureliano Buendía's execution, itself a consequence of colonial conflict, comes as a tragic surprise. But Márquez's alternative and conflicting concepts of time, like my initial figuration of continuous, undifferentiated time-sense, have a larger, ultimately inescapable connection to personal reality. My illustration is the two chronological economies that attempt to measure the heat of a cup of coffee. We simply can't calculate the rate at which it will cool or hold its warmth, not systematically, not with the world's largest computer, but we can affirm with assurance that in an hour it will be cold. Likewise, in a hundred years, we'll be dead. One chronology is synthetic and inapplicable. The other is absolute and useless. Our personal time-sense is teeming and haphazard. In an immediate sense, and for much of the long term, it is unpredictable. This unpredictability is characteristic of much more in life than we comfortably acknowledge. It is a reality for which human anxiety has very little tolerance. Unpredictability is the subject of James Gleick's account of the scientific study of chaos in a book of that title, *Chaos*, and the source of my cup of coffee illustration. Likewise, unpredictability is a foundational concern of Jacques Derrida's grammatology, his program of semiotic and epistemological instability widely known as deconstruction.

If these terms and concerns are at all compelling, or provocative of resistance, it is because the issues are so familiar: chaos on the one hand, and yearning for certainty, and to manage pain and unpredictability on the other. Elaine Scarry, however, suggests something even more complicated. In her study *The Body in Pain*, she argues that pain is our primary model of certainty, and our inability to communicate it or appreciate it in one another is our primary model of doubt. Most of human thought, it would appear, is directed at this central polarity, certainty and doubt, while what stories and poems do is give the unpredictable the comfort of existing within the circle of an account, a narrative, a dramatic or poetic plot. What the current discussion seems to be adding is a vocabulary and strategy for articulating the chaotic, as well as its relationship with the inevitable. Elaine Scarry's study, with its relentless analysis of the practice of cruelty and inflicting pain, appears determined to temper the elated elevation of doubt, uncertainty, or writing "under erasure," as Derrida puts it, with its disdain for what gets dismissed as the science of presence. Scarry forcefully argues that aggravates the destructive anguish and erosion of courage of people in pain. For those in pain, pain and presence are identical and inescapable.

The chaotic has always been a human concern. In the *Old Testament*, prophets were ethical philosophers whose visions of wheels on fire in the sky and aliens with eyeballs on their fingertips lent authority to their moral pronouncements. To anyone who reads their daily horoscope, I extend a collegial hand. It's a shame that we have to turn to the funny pages to seek celestial dignity for what we can't tell might hit us and how to deal with it on a day by day basis, but as President Clinton says, I feel your pain. The funny pages represent to us the last example of continuity in American life: the story of Mark Trail. For those of us who still don't get it, there are Anne Landers and Abigail van Buren. The rest is the horde of brute, unpredictable facts. Explicitly, we deal with the unforeseeable by extolling strategies for its containment: discipline, punishment, optimism, rituals of limited uncertainty such as sporting contests, lists and schedules, protocols, rules, language itself. My interest in poetry was excited by its particular role in enriching the tragic power of the unpredicted. I began writing that first poem without a subject or a plan. I was either supposed to be studying for an exam or writing a paper. I had not read much poetry that I liked or understood. I liked e.e. cummings because he was

sarcastic, used dirty words, and was vulnerable. I was all three. I liked Hart Crane because he was so passionately unintelligible until meticulously internalized, also extravagantly depressed, misunderstood, and scorned. That was it for my 20th century pleasures. I was intemperate and bigoted. Frost and Yeats were extensions of domestic calendar art, examples of New England or Irish sentimentalism. William Carlos Williams was soft. Ezra Pound was a scandal, anti-Semitic, yet pointlessly cerebral. T.S. Eliot was pathetic: April is the cruellest month. Marianne Moore was a woman, and I had no idea what that was.

I had attempted poems before, addressed subjects with words to whose glitter, assonances, and dramatic accents I was attentive, set them on a page surrounded by space, but my experience that evening, or early morning, was different. I felt words insisting on their graphic utterance, with reference to accident of accent and rhyme, irony and joke and implied plaintiveness, in a way that anticipated thought and transcended premeditation. For about an hour I was the agent of a life, and of something taking life in a way I had never previously experienced, not precisely. Plato called this phenomenon madness and irresponsibility, this inspiration or force of the muse that reforges on its own terms the shackles of thought. Not me, said the poet, but the voice that is great within me. Once I got going, my excitement and its rewards seemed clearly more important than my examination or paper. It took about a day or two to realize I could not make sense of what I had written. It had to do with life's gaudy circus, Norman Mailer and boxing, Joe Palooka, the comic strip boxer, and Humphrey Pennyworth, his overweight pal who liked to eat pies by the stack and ride around on a tricycle hooked up to an outhouse. Some romantic disappointment was involved, though I can't remember which one. I could not rectify the poem, revise away its contradictions and unintelligible opacities without damaging its verve, and I couldn't explain to myself what had occurred or how I might experience it again. I did experience it again, however, and wrote enough poems to gain admission to the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa and thereby take my first step toward avoiding the Viet Nam War. By then I had botched enough examinations and papers to be lucky to graduate from Penn State with a low C-average.

The analogies to writing my first poem have been listed, learning to read and to ride a bicycle, and all three of which involved the unexpected conversion of abilities and reserves into a momentum initially exciting enough to be felt as transcendental. I learned to read at a Salvation Army summer camp somewhere on Cape Cod when I was four years old. I remember learning to read and standing in line outdoors for a paper cupful of cherry Kool-aid I didn't want—bug juice, the older campers called it, making jokes about how they'd contaminated it. The sidewalk was cracked, there were moss and broken glass in the sparse grass, and I remember thinking how cracked cement, slimy moss, a shattered window-pane, and feeble grass were my life. My parents were divided. My mother was a clerk in the hospital at the foot of Beacon Hill. We shared a two-room apartment. She read bedtime stories to me, the same ones again and again, and after putting out my light, went into our living room-kitchen, un-made the sofa, and went to bed herself. She sent along one of my story books to this charity camp though I couldn't read. I knew the alphabet, and at a semi-conscious level I knew the stories she'd read me by memory. To recreate her voice, I spelled out the first few words of the first story, and then a miracle occurred: I heard her voice in my head, which accelerated my silent spelling, until suddenly, by line two of the story, my recognition of the words preceded my predicting them letter by letter. The voice I had created leaped ahead and saw before I thought, and allowed me to think leisurely, luxuriously, in the comfort of my mother's imaginary presence.

One of the poets I teach, either Allen Grossman or Wallace Stevens—I haven't been able to find the line—has a line that goes, "The mother's voice, the purpose of the poem." Well, I found the line and it wasn't that. It comes from the opening of the third section of Wallace Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn," written when he was about 70. It goes:

Farewell to an idea . . . The mother's face,  
The purpose of the poem, fills the room.  
They are together, here, and it is warm.

Allen Grossman, who was recently brought to the faculty of the Johns Hopkins University, after many years as the Paul E. Prosswimmer Professor of Poetry and General Education at Brandeis University, wrote complementary lines about women. In "The Stare," for example:

Desire, that is greater than the world stares  
From your eyes,

and I am acquainted with  
The earth's rage when women look at the mountains  
And say to one another, "Not enough, not enough,  
We will not sleep in this place—"

Not parallel, but congruent in the sense of completing a dialectic of disquiet.

Grossman also wrote,

Let me tell you how the thunder grew,  
And seemed mingled with familiar women's voices;  
Sirens entered, then,  
and in rain were lost,  
Or overtaken by the unmistakable word-  
Streak of birthcry;  
And the white, white lightning—wounds as they are  
Known to God—  
Inscribed one stroke on the black stone above.

And he wrote:

There is  
No singing without a woman who wants  
An answer sufficient to her injury—  
Such is the Muse.

I don't have to subscribe to these things, the Muse, God, or reductive characterizations of woman as mother, lover, the occultly discontented, or as anything else. I can represent Grossman's opinions and stand to one side, though it might help if I had a black-leather trench coat, a Cuban cigar, gold rings, and a crewcut, now that I've tossed the match, doused the fire, and can admire the ambiguous possibilities of smoke. Yet that is how I learned to read, without which I could never have written a poem. I wasn't consciously pursuing my mother's *face* in that so-called first poem, or offering an answer in poetical song to an injured woman, though I was probably responding to an awareness of a discontent I had fomented, though would not have confronted directly or acknowledged consciously. I wouldn't, as they say, get it, and maybe still

don't, though I willingly squirm as fast as I can in that direction, in the direction of the light. And I mean this both seriously and irresponsibly, as I'll try to explain.

Bear in mind that to take something both seriously and irresponsibly is to cloak utterance and commitments in smoke, to give grandiose expression to smoke and insist that it confers value, that it is human or real, that its absence would be dreary. To obscure oneself among others, to study their cultural valuables and intellectual prescriptions, and to elude the implications of these as if they were mono-dimensional, or like rules, is to be as if a spy among thought police. Of course everyone, not only poets, does this. It's a paradigm of ordinary being. Are academics invariably thought police of values, behaviors, and perspectives, as well as custodians and security guards? This depends on the academic. To say that I'm a spy is to be a spy no longer, but I'm not entirely a custodian, or policeman, or corporate umpire or trainer. I'm a poet-professor, though I'd hate to describe the events twenty-five years ago, in which that term, poet-professor, achieved local notoriety, appearing in the Portland newspapers on daily basis, events to which I was indirectly connected: a kindly woman was killed, shot in the heart. As I said, I graduated from college, Penn State, with a C-minus average, but it was worse: three of my professors, in the last semester of my senior year, failed to turn in final grades for me because of my astounding absences and still outstanding work (outstanding as in incomplete, never submitted, etc.), so the Registrar gave me B's in three subjects to punish the faculty for not meeting their deadlines. Of course I mean even more than that when I describe myself as a cultural, academic, and philosophic double agent: I mean I'm a poet. I mean that I practice deliberate epistemological irresponsibility; that I subordinate epistemological rigor to the pleasures of momentum; that I study and experiment with the sacrifice of objectivity to subversive, half-secret splendors of the subjective self. I call this variously allegory, irony, metaphor, even rhyme, insofar as rhyme confers an irrational authority to propositions otherwise potentially dubious, or an enamel gleam that deflects judicious inspection: If the gloves don't fit, for example, you have to acquit.

In a novel I like to teach, *Doctor Faustus* by Thomas Mann, when the devil, a sort of hallucinatory morphomaniac or Robin

Williams character, appears to the composer Adrian Leverkühn, the latter attempts to demur or disown interest in a demonic pact which would intensify his creative powers, by citing his esteem for hard working fellow musicians, the compositionally correct, as it were. The devil, however, jests, and inquires derisively, "Do you mean those who claim that the boring is interesting because for them the interesting has become boring?" In accounting for the title of this talk, I would be disingenuous in a vein contrary to my real concerns and interests to deny awareness of the transformations that have taken place in English departments and in literary study over the last thirty years, developments known collectively as theory, specifically as cultural studies, structuralism, deconstruction, feminism and gender studies, or more truculently, queer studies, and which have given rise to the dismissive and ubiquitous rubric, political correctness. (What comes to mind, whenever I hear conservatives complain about political correctness, is Richard Nixon talking about "Getting down to the real nitty gritty!") He actually said that on TV.)

With regards to all of these concomitant, invariably contradictory developments, it is not that I don't take a position, but that a poet must resist having her position defined. I have no interest in the vindictive anxieties David Lehman expressed in *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man*, or Dinesh D'Souza's speciously clear-eyed, even-handed, otherwise myopic and loaded *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, or the milder, yet still misguided Mark Edmundson's *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry*, or at least so-called: Edmundson attributes both Derrida and Plato's respective antipathies to presence and empiricism to the same anxieties he sees enshrined in the Second Commandment and Judaic hostility to graven images. Derrida's problem with the graven image, with the epistemology of the written, or what he calls the false science of presence, is much more complicated, Nietzschean in its rigorous embrace of chaos and uncertainty, and more potentially fruitful for a poet's contemplation than Edmundson, or anyone else to my knowledge, has suggested. In a widely anthologized poem about the semi-comic ambiguities of male desire, "Peter Quince at the Clavier," Wallace Stevens wrote:

Beauty is momentary in the mind—  
The fitful tracing of a portal;  
But in the flesh it is immortal.  
The body dies, the body's beauty lives.

What exactly is this contract lawyer, later the dean of American bonding lawyers, this expert in saving the Hartford Insurance Company costly losses from ambiguous verbal commitments, saying about beauty and the mind?

[Once more:

Beauty is momentary in the mind—  
The fitful tracing of a portal;  
But in the flesh it is immortal.  
The body dies, the body's beauty lives.]

The mind is fickle, the flesh is gorgeous and immortal. The flesh is fickle, subject to corruption, but memory is imperishable. This is doubletalk. Note how the chime of portal and immortal blinds the mind to the contradiction celebrated by the double-syllabled, so-called feminine rhyme. Don't we hear Andrew Marvell's impetuous chariots in Peter Quince's thunderous attempt to justify jumpstarted courtship? The male *carpe diem* contra the female wait a minute? You can't think your way through Stevens' suing for sexual peace-of-mind, push a thread through the eyelets of his shifting needles of insight, without hurting your head—and Stevens' contradictions, throughout his poetry, always do two things: convey pain, usually in connection with loneliness and with denied or deferred desire, or extol freedom and privacy, or secrecy, via eloquent obfuscation. Antagonists of theory generally dislike complexity of this sort in both poetry and philosophy. They want sense to make sense. Not me. They complain that the instability of the signifier entails the collapse of moral responsibility. I say that if Henny Penny, with a head so tiny, nonetheless gets accidentally walloped with a pea, she has irretrievably bad luck: in which case it makes sense to offer an oscillating target, or at least flutter the eyelashes, which means looking at you is about to strike me blind, or I don't want to see you because I have better things on my mind, or both. What life consists of, history and the future, despite our massive sentiments and arguments to the contrary, all the events that can be organized in a chronology, all the ideas that

can be summarized in a philosophy, all the marriage and love and anguish that can be celebrated in a poetry, all the teaching, all the auditioning—which must mean the listening, as well as the dancing and the speaking—all systematic practice, all implementation of law, is coincidence, not mere or simply, but absolutely coincidence, and having said so, and having heard it said, we can understand the terror implicit in Hegel's concern that anything be understood too quickly and easily. Our logic, like my language, is merely a lasso. Being is metaphor, which means coincidence and change, but I find it disquieting that in modern Greece, *Metaphoroi* refers to the public transportation system, the trolley, the bus, or the subway. To create in this stampede of insignificant significance a space for the self to be itself and speak, to make a poem, to read one, is no small thing. But it's transitory, like anything else. No law lasts forever. Congress never goes home for good. *Aufhebung* refers to an unstable equation in which the second term consumes the first. One and one is two, but that's the end of one and one. You can say two is one and one until you're blue in the face, but don't kid yourself. It's a whole new ballgame. This is what Derrida meant by *différance*, and what Lacan derided as a new figure in the foam of Aphrodite, to whose insubstantial allure we always come around, like children digging holes with sticks on the beach. There's a sense in which Henny Penny was right: the sky is falling.

Each of the theoretical perspectives cited somewhere above represents somebody's view of what's interesting: whether the history and politics of cultural formation; the strange, stirring structural cognates and analogies in human behavior and sociology; the terrors and displacements of vulgar homophobia; the genial and unconscious stupidities that attend the oppression and misvaluation of women. Peter Quince, the carpenter responsible for set design in the craftsmen's play that occurs within Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," said, thinking out loud, "There are two hard things: one of them is to bring moonlight into a room." Stevens must have thought this was very funny. The other hard thing is more obscure, but having brought moonlight into a room does not mean one's problems are over. The other hard thing is to find a hole in a wall through which lovers can talk to each other. Quince is a carpenter. But you can't make a hole in the wall through which lovers can talk with a hammer and chisel or a crowbar. Shakespeare must have thought this was very funny.

It was Nietzsche who said, making an observation on the history of metaphysics and the inadequacy of the episteme, or that which is presumed to be known, a remark of conspicuous importance to Derrida, according to his interpreter and translator, Gayatri Spivak, that *at a certain point the idea becomes a woman*. Nietzsche was unlucky with women, apparently contracting syphilis on his first and final visit to a brothel. He grew up to be an infamous misogynist. In a scene transposed into Thomas Mann's novel, the same "Doctor Faustus" mentioned earlier, Nietzsche was so unnerved by the assembled available girls in the brothel living room—he called them, hauntingly, "the daughters of the wilderness"—that he dashed to the piano and struck a resounding chord to reify and discharge all the hitherto inaudible tensions in the room. Eventually a shy, retiring woman of pleasure caught his attention. She accidentally brushed against his arm. He called her a clearwing, a morpho, using terminology used to classify moths, and she was the one who infected him. He grew an immense moustache, the largest I have ever seen, and died of syphilis of the brain. This did not deter Thomas Mann, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, or Gayatri Spivak from discerning his breadth of knowledge and advantageously employing his remarkable *aperçus*. *The idea becomes a woman*. Was this what I meant when I tried to relate learning to read by my memory of the alphabet and my mother's voice, and the verbal acceleration and lubricity I experienced when I wrote my first poem? Yes, though not entirely: I didn't know that my idea had become a woman, just as you don't know how this statement is meaningful, and there are benefits to knowledge.

Actually, I disagree with the commentators I studied, primarily Gayatri Spivak, who seem to limit Nietzsche's bizarre proposition to his antipathy to castrating effeminate Christianity. Prior to Christianity, in other words, the idea did not become a woman. For thought or a philosophic composure which aspires to transcend the expediency, the complacent monomania of rational empiricism, the paradigms offered by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*, though characteristically clownish, are potentially instructive: he wonders, "Perhaps truth is a woman who has reasons for not letting us see her reasons?" To my way of thinking, the idea has to become a woman, if one is a man, to make the making of poetry possible. If one is a woman, to the extent that gender, however suspect, is a category pervasively inscribed in language and the drama of daily life, the idea has to become a man. What's at

stake is possessing, for the benefit of mind, the cataclysmic and fundamental irresponsibility, the triumphant freedom, of the sexual act. Nietzsche writes, also in *The Gay Science*, "Even the compassionate curiosity of the wisest student of humanity is inadequate for guessing how this or that woman manages to accommodate herself to this solution of the [sexual] riddle...and how the ultimate philosophy and skepsis of woman casts anchor at this point!" (Nietzsche punctuates with an exclamation point!) Skepsis means profoundly reasonable doubt, and to cast anchor means to pull it up, to let the ship travel in unforeseen currents, not to throw the anchor onto the water as if dice on a gambling board, or as if bread for seagulls. Could Nietzsche have just as well said men? Could he have written, "Even the compassionate curiosity of the wisest student of humanity is inadequate for guessing how this or that man manages to accommodate himself to this solution of the [sexual] riddle...and how the ultimate philosophy and skepsis of man manages to cast anchor at this point!" The answer has to be yes. Anyone can play around, and conversely, anyone can regard sex as unromantically as putting on an overshoe to keep the feet from getting wet during a rainstorm, but to summon one's ultimate philosophy to cast anchor and abandon skepticism is something else. It's to pursue the full modality of truth, what Nietzsche also called "joyful un wisdom," or what we can call love, an unreserved joyous commitment to the unknown as well as the known, or to the totality of being. And love may very well have achieved its ascendancy in Western thought with the advent of Christ, the cast anchor.

Earlier in this paper I misremembered a line from Wallace Stevens: I wrote, "The mother's voice, the purpose of the poem," when Stevens had written "The mother's face." This could illustrate what critic Harold Bloom called *clinamen*, a necessary but inadvertent and unconscious swerving dictated by anxiety whereby the ego maintains its sense of a distinct identity. Indeed, I could have sworn Stevens said "The mother's voice." Twenty-five years ago, I heard Neil Young sing in a song:

I used to be a woman, you know  
I took you for a ride  
I let you fly my airplane  
It looked good for your pride

An icon of popular entertainment, a folk rock singer, such as Neil Young, is so thoroughly drenched in self-reflecting subjectivity, in narcissism, that a dynamic of enthralled glamour takes obliterating precedence over the content of the song, or even the content of the experience it represents. "Listen to this song," someone says. They want to please us, and we want to please them with our attention, but it is almost impossible. Usually all we can attend to is the dynamic of their pleased listening, which for the listener, no longer listening alone, has been unpleasantly diminished and become a tinny echo of the experience of self-listening discovered in solitude. When writers cite songs in stories or essays they are reading out loud, they often attempt to transcend this aesthetic impasse of ego by themselves singing the line or verse. We have all observed how this never works, or how in the absence of the mirror, the ersatz fails to shine or reflect. Just as love is a reciprocal narcissism, a solitude of two and a deliciously mistaken case of identity, being able to participate in someone else's cheap pleasures, to share their adoration of a popular singer which is really self-adoration, is one of our marks and rituals of love's condition. You and I, my audience, are at a polite remove from that condition, in an official ambiance which will soon be dissolved amicably, I hope, and without a hallucinatory loss of self, or as Keats said, without "a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,/A burning forehead and a parching tongue." Having attempted to strip Young's quatrain of its veneer of mutually embarrassing personal excitement, perhaps I can productively direct attention to the quatrain's personally exciting content, what it says, not the sloppy way I hear it, nor the androgynous character of his plaintive tenor, nor my ridiculous belief that he and I look alike, etc. "I used to be a woman," he whines, as if it hurts and pleases him to remember. Young's words constituted for me a starting point, and after hearing him sing "Last Ride to Tulsa," five years or so after I'd begun writing poems, I deliberately sought my identity in attitude and voice as a woman in order to write. After that, everything changed, I can assure you.

Here I can insert my final paradigm of self-constituted momentum, learning to ride a bicycle. I was taught to ride a bicycle by my stepfather's cousin, Levon Tuysuzian, on my elementary school playground in York, Pennsylvania, which was the site of several humiliations I can refresh perfectly to this moment, some of them involving little girls, some little boys, and no triumphs

whatsoever, except for this discovery of locomotive autonomy via the pedals of my secondhand 24" Columbia bicycle—same company that made the chairs in my classrooms in Luther Bonney—and a fortified intuition regarding the relationship between maintaining balance and moving forward. Levon held the seat of my bicycle, and ran beside me, keeping me upright and whispering, with his naturally gentle voice, "Keep pedaling. You can do it." The function of shame as a social regulator, its relationship to those humiliations that construct an outsider, a scapegoat, or a poet, or to those embarrassments which are more pleasurable and constitute that character of popular entertainment, their reference to personal disjunctions and social contradictions as converted into icons and artifacts, and public value, especially in popular songs, is my connection here to my pleasure in Neil Young. My school yard was the site of many humiliations. Falling off a bicycle in public, revealing I didn't know how to ride one, was one of them. Also at stake is a paradigm of pedagogy. I fell off the bike several times, scraping its new paint-job. Once I learned to get on and keep the bike going, I discovered I didn't know how to stop it, or get off without falling down. Love is like that, but it's also like my cousin Levon telling me to keep pedaling, to get up and try again. The Tuysuzians, his father Charles and my stepfather's father Sarkis, had fled the Armenian holocaust in Turkey, crossing on foot several hundred miles of desert to Alexandria, Egypt, where my stepfather was born. Thence to Watertown, Massachusetts, and even to Lewiston, Maine, where father and son worked in shoe factories when they were blacklisted in Boston for union and other political activities. You can look over the shoulder of someone you trust as if almost to love and gaze appreciatively at something you would never have considered alone: such as being hunted for one's ethnic origins, crossing a desert on foot, being blacklisted and a factory worker in Lewiston, even reading and writing poems, inviting an idea to become a woman, or a man.

Now I'm not sure that whatever I thought this was, becoming a woman, can be quantified anymore, not even within the poems I wrote at that time, poems that were collected in *Whole Horse*, my first published book. In *The Dyer's Hand*, a collection of essays on poetry, W.H. Auden observes that a poem must aspire to a state beyond accessibility to revision—obvious enough, after a moment's thought—and Auden observed that this is a quality enjoyed by only two other modes of narrative and utterance, the letter and

the dream. I'm not sure anymore if this is true: letters are often revised, and dreams are subject to be revisited, re-dreamed, and of course mis-remembered. But when I read this twenty-five years ago, it seemed an amazing truth, and one I could only possess—the focused intimacy of the letter and the easy seamlessness of a dream—with the gentle irony of my newly liberated inner woman. Years later, when I read *Epistemology of the Closet* by Eve Sedgwick, which attributes endemic homophobia to the desperate and endemic repression of a ubiquitous social truth, our interiorized other gender—what did I do? Well, I thanked my lucky stars that my practice of veiled but sincere camp, mental androgyny, or simple verbal cross-dressing had spared me, I hope, from inner terrors perpetrated by ignorance of half my being and from homophobic bigotry. I knew a woman who'd come from California with a lot of hallucinogenics, a UPI reporter who lived in Stroudwater. I lived in Limington on a small farm with a big garden. I had a lot of pumpkins I didn't know what to do with. The woman had a beautiful behind, and though I didn't make this connection, she evidently did when I made her a present of about a dozen pumpkins in October for Halloween. She stood in her doorway laughing as I unloaded my pumpkins onto her side lawn. She invited me in for a cup of tea, and I picked up *The Paris Review* to which she subscribed, and I read a poem by Pablo Neruda translated by James Wright and Robert Bly, "Melancholy Inside Families." It began:

I keep a blue bottle.  
 Inside it an ear and a portrait.  
 When the night dominates  
 the feathers of the owl,  
 when the hoarse cherry tree  
 rips out its lips and makes menacing gestures  
 with rinds which the ocean wind often perforates...

I had no idea what any of this meant, but I knew it was exactly what I wanted: a poem that hit you over the head like a stained glass window, that engaged you with the gaudy vivacity of an urgent, but not necessarily terrifying, hallucination. While I was reading this poem and thinking about the lips of the hoarse cherry tree, my friend was playing the new Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* album and instructing me to sip my first cup of rosehip tea. At the corner of my eye was the maroon Indian-print cotton spread covering the

mattress on her floor. She did not yet own the two basset hounds, Sam and Dave. The cover of *The Paris Review* was maroon and gray like the Indian-print spread. My mind had turned to the mush from which they make wine. I drove to Limington enchanted with Neruda's poem and thinking I had to change everything. I started a poem about tiger lilies which got nowhere, but I didn't stop looking for ways to make poems that would hit the reader like a stained glass window falling safely from a church, and eventually I had *Whole Horse*.

Since that time, I've had several changes of address, Limington, Falmouth Foreside, and Portland, and several equally conscious changes of aesthetic program. For the last few years I've been writing love poems coupled and driven by a conscious insistence on intellectual purpose. In practical terms, this has led to the writing of shorter poems, where thought directs a poem toward its closure, rather than an elaboration of conjunctions and analogies, though these remain extremely important to me. I consciously subscribe to Nietzsche's proposition that an idea is a metaphor, or the combination of dissimilar yet somehow analogous concerns, and I deliberately attempt to collect about one a day, a metaphorically foundational idea—first thing in the morning, with coffee. But I've understood the occasion for the poem itself, for the last several months, as the ability to cast anchor, to entertain the prospects of my subjectivity as an incomplete thing in an unknown space in which the objective idea, the metaphoric conjunction, remains intact, yet is subordinated to the subjectivity which realizes itself in language which in turn artfully discusses this objective idea; i.e., it converts the objective thought into what's comfortably understood as a literary subject. The objective idea, the metaphor, the fortuitous conjunction of dissimilar things, is offered in the garment of subjectivity: language. It becomes the subject in all the comprehensive irony of the term, subject: i.e., subject, subject, and subject, and thus the idea becomes a woman: subjective, subjectively, and subjected. Ultimately, the unknown ground of the idea of mind is the mind itself as body, as a muscle capable of several activities, primarily varieties of knowing.

This understanding of my process as an incomplete subjectivity enjoying the pleasure of realizing and/or provisionally completing itself, is changing the way I teach poetry and especially how to write about it: how not to convert it simply to meaning,

but to describe what about it is poetic. This was Harold Bloom's goal in introducing the term *clinamen*, borrowed from Lucretius's name for his theory of the swerving of atoms falling through space, attracted to each other, colliding, and thereby creating fate. Bloom posited this swerving in stylistic and intellectual modes as necessary to assert individuality. I'm not sure any critic has successfully made what Bloom has called "maps of misprision" or described a poem by its deliberate swervings. Bloom barely tries. He quotes a few lines and asserts he detects the hidden presence of a predecessor from whom the writer under consideration is averting, much as I did when I detected Andrew Marvell's ghost in Stevens' Peter Quince. But as a teacher, I've discovered that I can productively show students how an emotional figuration in language invokes a subjective field in which an image acquires heightened vividness: This woman is afraid so the sound of the howling dog seems extremely loud. This man is in love so the fruit in the apple tree seems extremely red, contrary to the claims of Amy Lowell, Ezra Pound, and the so-called Objectivists. Pound's "A Station in the Metro" is an oft-cited example of the Objectivist aesthetic.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals, on a wet, black bough.

Susceptibility to an apparition is what I would identify as invoking a subjective field, not Objectivist at all, which primarily, as an ideology, deflected Pound's insight into his subjective condition, and replaced it with contagious self-consciousness, the excessive desire to make a poem and enjoy the status such an accomplishment could confer. Objectivism was a program for not getting in touch with oneself, for decorative preciousness and the afflicting distortions of denial.

Students can indeed make maps, inevitably overlapping maps, of projected subjectivity to describe what's poetic about a poem. Similarly, I've talked to my writing students about exploring positioning themselves at sea, unanchored, how incomplete subjectivity differs from their various and defined objectivities as spouse or partner, son or daughter, student, employee, someone obliged to be somewhere and do something.

The anxiety at this end of the century and the millennium, is that artists have run out of space to swerve or to assert meaningful

uniqueness, that all art consists of quotation, and that pastiche is the only possible contemporary style. This is post-modernism. I like pastiche okay, but I like strong personalities too, the drama of their risks and their hungers, independence and sadness, so I suspect that post-modernism's enthusiasm for pastiche is a case of the boring being represented as interesting because the interesting has become boring due to paralysis and dread, polite timidity, and other default positions of the emotionally incapable. And yet the collection I'm working on may very well respond to these issues of pastiche and the pathos and limits of personal assertion. It's called *Ferdinand's Meadow*, which refers to the bull in the children's story who loved flowers and inadvertently sat on a bumblebee, thereby making an extraordinary impression on the bullring scouts from Madrid. The flowers in my case are literary items, books and poems I teach, and my students would recognize the figure of the childlike bull who makes a lot of noise and charges around and loves certain things, but would not be very good in a fight, as their professor. Ultimately a teacher is a child of divided parents, her students and her texts, an instinctive mediator, a spy in the house of the thought police, their friend on the inside, and in many senses a teacher is a poet too: someone seeking in language an emotional middle ground that serves dissimilar ideas in collision as a foundation affirming an obscure, immeasurable value.

I want to close by reading a poem I wrote soon after my accident last fall, when I fell and broke my wrist and five ribs. The experience of breathing at only 10 percent and being unable to stop my body from convulsively yawning about every twenty seconds—which, I believed in my incomprehending, inaccessible, impenetrable agony, came from thinking; therefore, I lay in my hospital bed trying not to think—altered many of my perspectives, certainly visited me with the specter of my mortality. The poem will be published in *The Massachusetts Review*. Its opening sentence goes: "Sometimes when I miss my Messiah/I think of yours..." Notice the gestures that invoke potential subjectivities, the nebulous *sometimes*, the state of yearning or *missing*, the possibility of spiritual deliverance represented by an awaited religious figure, the condition of alienation that identifies this religious figure as *yours*.

## The Messiah

Sometimes when I miss my Messiah  
I think of yours, how He was lovely,  
Kindly and wise, yet with enough panache  
To ride into Jerusalem that fatal Easter,  
Pesach, on a white ass. Go ahead,  
I tell the world, since you are without sin,  
Cast your stone. He was friends with a whore,  
Women who'd forsaken sex, bemused men  
Of all kinds, a gill-netter who became  
A fisher of guys, a tax-collector,  
The crazy one who fell beneath a horse  
And came back with a name change  
And a new career—Apostle Paul,  
Though actually, like me, he never knew  
Or saw his Messiah, yet became the church's  
First soldier, and believed and knew  
How simple virtue could save us wriggling  
Eels from the cold ocean where we swim  
Looking for a river and a chestnut tree—  
Because often enough it's not this or that  
Sin in which we drown, but the waves of chaos  
Under them, our upswells of wrath  
And laziness and nervous greed. I like  
His magic tricks, the one with food of course.  
How can you beat bread and fish? "Put your hand  
Right in here, Thomas," and getting Lazarus  
To climb out of his dirt. I like the fact  
He had so many male friends and took  
His meals formally with them, how one  
Betrayed Him with a kiss and hung himself  
In a tree full of flowers, white striped red.  
I'm glad He liked mountains, chit-chatted  
With Satan, that His ministry consisted  
Of travelling around telling stories,  
That He went to death bravely, that they  
Just had to kill someone so determined to be nice  
And He couldn't compromise, that He gave courage  
To one beside Him that cried—and what a death,  
Nailed, suffocated, gutted, fried—that in the end  
He shared and expressed the anguish  
Of everyman, and asked out loud, *Eli*

*Lama sabachthani*. O my God,  
Why hast thou forsaken me?

My goal in poetry, for the poems I wish to write in the days  
and years to come, has been expressed for me by Wallace Stevens,  
to whom I'll give the last words. The lines are from the XXIVth  
section of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," though unlike Stevens,  
my intentions don't entail a gender focus:

A poem like a missal found  
In the mud, a missal for that young man,  
That scholar hungriest for that book,  
The very book, or, less, a page,  
Or, at the least, a phrase, that phrase,  
A hawk of life, that latined phrase:  
To know; a missal for brooding-sight.  
To meet that hawk's eye and to flinch  
Not at the eye but at the joy of it.  
I play. But this is what I think.

Don't forget the mud, or that this mysterious prayer is intended  
for someone else, or the hawk's eye, from whose fierce joy we flinch.

("The Messiah" was first published in *The Massachusetts Review*.)



## RECOGNITION DAY 1996

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HIS is my second Recognition Day in two years, and it comes on the heels of my Russell Chair Lecture, which I gave two weeks ago today, and which more or less concludes my term as USM's Russell Chair of Education and Philosophy. In my lecture I attempted to bring philosophy and personal insight to account for my particular experience, development, and achievement at the University as a professor and poet. I had to apply to be Russell Chair. Someone nominated me, and I was then invited by the Provost to write a brief professional biography of myself and a description of what I would do if awarded the Russell Chair, which included an honorarium or stipend, and a substantial allowance for expenses, such as buying books. But my principal responsibility was to give the hour-long speech I gave two weeks ago, and to respond to situations like Recognition Day. I've taught at the University for thirty years, and pursued virtually every prize, promotion, or honorable responsibility available to me, though I don't think of myself as a competitive person, nor as one who takes particular pleasure in rewards or honors. And I suspect that many of you regard the present experience, Recognition Day, with similarly conflicted emotions. In a novel I read this winter by the British writer, Anita Brookner, winner of the Booker Prize, the British equivalent of the Pulitzer, Brookner's heroine asks her more streetwise and cynical girlfriend, "Do you mean it's all a game?" The girlfriend replies: "It's all a game when you win. When you lose it's something much worse." My favorite American poet, Wallace Stevens, wrote one of his longest poems, "The Comedian as the Letter C," to submit for the Blindman Prize of the Poetry Society of South Carolina. This was in 1922. Stevens was about 43, struggling to establish himself as a lawyer as well as a poet. His literary friends advised against his entering the contest, arguing that it was like roulette and too dangerous to submit one's artistic morale and self-esteem to something as unpredictable as a poetry competition, but Stevens laughed them off, saying: "What's the

point of holding a contest if nobody enters it?" Yet when the contest judge, the cigar-smoking Objectivist poet Amy Lowell, awarded the Blindman Gold Medal and cash prize to Grace Hazard Conkling, about whom my cursory research reveals nothing, Stevens threw his twenty-page poem into the trash, where it was rescued for Stevens and posterity by his landlord.

So it's a game when you win, and something much worse when you lose, the wit of this formula speaking to our conflicted experience with the pleasure of striving, the pleasant irrelevance of winning, and unpleasant bitterness of losing. Yesterday I told a student that getting good grades, and ultimately all achievement, was really not too different from housekeeping, simply something you learned to do every day, and which became more satisfying as it came to be approached with improved verve and asperity, a pattern to life which comes to constitute its order and identity. When Thomas Mann was awarded the Nobel Prize, he observed in a letter to a friend, "It lay in my path, and I simply stooped over to pick it up." But he was a hard worker, and his children report that he never spent a morning without writing, and I would suggest that this uneasy combination of modesty and cynicism which I am trying to address, this fugitive grudging emotion some of us might associate with our being here at all, is a critical component to our success. I mean that vein of dissatisfaction and tormenting discontent with which we learn to make a provisional peace, a truce, an accommodation, and which comes to constitute our strength, our ability to process the self-critical tension we convert into work, work which in itself leads to the revelation of new goals, new standards and a new character of achievement. It for this that our nerves and sinews come to hunger with such deeply personal intensity that a public event to receive a prize seems a distraction, an annoying, uninvited pause. But the fact that our enterprise and orientation to endeavor is shared, can also be a source of courage, inspiration, and renewal. At the end of my Russell Chair Speech, I quoted some lines from a poem by Wallace Stevens that expressed my sense of this. Please forgive Stevens' gender focus. This is what he wrote:

A poem like a missal found  
In the mud, a missal for that young man,  
That scholar hungriest for that book,  
The very book, or, less, a page,

Or, at the least, a phrase, that phrase,  
 A hawk of life, that latined phrase:  
 To know; a missal for brooding-sight.  
 To meet that hawk's eye and to flinch  
 Not at the eye but at the joy of it.  
 I play. But this is what I think.

Don't forget the mud, or that this mysterious prayer is intended for someone else. Don't forget the hawk's eye, the spirit of life expressed and realized by a keen achievement, and from whose fierce joy we flinch. In other words, we're not just here to express or receive appreciation. We're sharing a moment of vitality and community that has been created by your successes and achievements, a community and vitality we otherwise wouldn't enjoy.

But besides a hawk's ferocity, there is mildness and patience, such as yours for this moment, for my speech and for the poem I'm going to read to you, which is also a component of your accumulated power, and which might contain the clue, like a story or poem, for whatever you're going to do next.

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In addition to being Russell Chait, I had a touch of bad luck last winter that taught me something about mildness and patience. In a word, I was a patient for two days at Mercy Hospital, because I fell down and broke five ribs on impact with my elbow, and broke my wrist. I was walking from Congress Street onto Brown near the old Hu Shang restaurant. A parking policeman was checking meters and awarding parking tickers with astonishing speed. I was determined to get to my car, parked across from back of the Civic Center, before he did, in case my meter was expired. Not only was he fast, but he had very big feet in workboots, and his feet were splayed when he walked, like a circus clown. I walked faster and faster. I couldn't believe I wasn't gaining on him. These parking meter attendants are city employees, of course, but not, in fact, policemen. They wear blue jackets or coats, and badges of some sort to dignify their enterprise, but often orange safety vests and chino trousers, as in this case. I couldn't catch up with him, and suddenly he was standing in the street next to my car. He seemed to be waving his arms as if writing something. I was beside the parking lot now, beyond the old Hu Shang, and broke into a run for one or two steps, forgetting the foot-high concrete ledge that surrounds the parking area. I foolishly tried to slow my landing by

extending my hand. I felt like an orange that had been tossed from a tall building and involuntarily forced to expel its seeds. The wind went out of me as if something solid, and the first thing that crossed my mind was "Oh damn it, I've been pipped." I got to my feet and struggled to my car. I got far enough to see that the parking official was giving street directions to a lady in a red station wagon, who was evidently a stranger to downtown Portland and requiring informed guidance. There was fifteen minutes left on my meter. I had to sit down awhile. Eventually I got to Mercy Hospital, where they X-rayed me. When you break a lot of ribs, they only count the ones that are more or less fixed in place, not the so-called floating or lower ribs, which I think I cracked as well. The pain, like all pain, was indescribable. My lung was sufficiently torn so that in combination with the pain, I was breathing at a level of less than 25 percent. This caused my body to yawn, or go into uncontrollable spasm about every fifteen to twenty seconds, which made me howl out in a way others found quite amazing. Everyone certainly stopped to stare. At that point, I didn't understand about yawning and my breathing, so I decided that I was having these spasms because I was thinking, and that I needed to train myself temporarily not to think in order to become free of those noisy and incessant excruciations. Of course they kept coming anyway, and of course, every time I checked, sure enough I'd been thinking. It was an interesting exercise, trying to wholly clear my mind, and oddly strengthening, though based, of course, on a totally erroneous diagnosis. But eventually I learned to lie in bed for at least a day and gaze out the window, which became the occasion for this poem I'm going to read to you, "Crows in October." It's a poem, among other things, addressed to disbelief, which is what I've been talking about in connection with honor and recognition, and the need for a moment to share these things, maybe for a moment to crow. Here's the poem:

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### Crows in October

You can be an atheist and still believe in God.  
 You believe in love, don't you? And in being loved?  
 If you don't you're in trouble, and we're in trouble,  
*Tout le monde*, hauling your worthless carcass  
 And pathos through life. But we do it,  
 And we love you, and forgive you, for being so

Viciously wretched and self-absorbed. Belief  
 In God, like love, gives you a frame  
 For accepting the grace that someone  
 Can think you're adorable, and the courage  
 To love others, generally, not just particularly—  
 Dividing the world into sheep you crap on  
 And goats you admire and fear,  
 Tends to be self-flattering. Love them all  
 For the stupid, human things they do,  
 Like lie in a hospital bed and think about  
 Crows in a tree. What's there to think?  
 Crow in a tree, crow in a tree,  
 The higher it goes, the more it can see.  
 But not even that. Just the crow  
 On the uppermost branches of a maple's  
 Ecstatic skeleton this mid-October,  
 Most leaves fallen, watching things  
 And uttering his caw to God and me  
 With a peaceful confidence founded on faith,  
 Love and being loved, by Mother Crow,  
 Lover Crow, Brother Crow and Sister,  
 And the universe, which above all else  
 Is mostly black and blue.

Thank you, and again, congratulations.



## FINAL WORDS: RUSSELL CHAIR



IT'S difficult for me to express the intensity of my gratitude for the honor of serving for the past two years as Walter E. Russell Chair of Education and Philosophy, my gratitude to the Russell family and the University of Southern Maine administration, President Pattenau, Provost Lapping and Tina Pratt, the Director of Administration, without invoking history, my history and the relatively recent history of this venerable campus, where Walter E. Russell served as a teacher and leader for nearly the first half of this century. I saw my first opera, *La Bohème*, from a front row in Russell Hall, during my first year at USM, 1965, when Upton-Hastings did not yet exist except as scaffolding and ruined grass, Bailey Hall was still two buildings, rather than wings of the five story structure a few people recall was once an addition, those of us who ran through its muddy foundations between classes and between buildings dodging rain or snow. From the front row of Russell Hall, I could watch the singers goose each other and wink between arias. Of course I wanted to run away and join the circus from that very moment to this one, and in my poetry and pedagogy, I've of course always been trying to run away—and join the opera. The flying saucer dining hall didn't exist, nor the Towers, and lots of people for whom buildings nowadays have been named—Edna Dickey, Esther Wood—were on the faculty, were people with whom I drank coffee in the faculty lounge, who teased me for eating too many of the donuts they often provided on Fridays. When I turned the corner from School Street onto College Avenue, I drove by the white house on the corner there, with the bay window and the huge Chinese vase with a floral arrangement that always combined gorgeous dignity and surprise. And so I became, gradually, a citizen of this institution, and have now spent more than half my life here. My gratitude for the honor, which I think is the highest honor we have to bestow on resident faculty, is something whose intensity takes me by surprise. One begins even one's professional life in personal terms, and thinks of

ethics as a personal obligation, and so it remains; yet as one becomes a citizen, and learns the gratification of honor and reward, one discovers an ethics based in the life of a community, which is ultimately larger and more valuable than personal right or wrong, of which the personal remains a part. I have a communal, as well as a collegial relationship with my successor, Dr. Kathleen MacPherson. Twenty years ago, though we were mostly strangers to each other, we participated in a communal experiment, a food coop, which collected its bags of vegetables and grains once a week from the basement of my house. These are the things that make a life, memories of art's glory and mischief, and the effort to shape a community that reflects, extends, and instructs our ethical sense, our pleasure in esteem, safety, and dignity. Thank you, President Pattenaude and Provost Lapping, for giving me this opportunity to express my thanks and my pleasure in welcoming Professor Kathleen MacPherson as my successor as Walter E. Russell Chair.

This lecture is printed in accordance with requirements of the Walter E. Russell Chair in Philosophy and Education. The holder of the chair presents one or more public lectures on issues in education and/or philosophy.

Dr. Russell was the second principal of Western Maine Normal School at Gorham (1905-1940) and a teacher at that institution for many years. The University of Southern Maine is a successor institution.

Winifred S. Russell, Dr. Russell's widow endowed the chair in her will, stating that the position is to be "devoted to the teaching of subjects which were not only Dr. Russell's professional specialities, but the passion of his life, and will perpetuate his name on a campus where he served with unusual distinction and fidelity."

A distinguished record of service at USM and evidence of significant achievement "in teaching and scholarly activity involving education and/or philosophy, service to the University and public service" are the qualifications.

The terms of Mrs. Russell's will require that each two years a member of the USM faculty be appointed to hold the chair for a period of two years. There is no limitation on the number of terms and individual may hold the chair; on the other hand, a different individual might be appointed at each two-year interval.

Kenneth Rosen, professor of English, has been a faculty member at the University of Southern Maine since 1965. In addition, he has taught at Syracuse University and at the Warren Wilson College Master of Fine Arts program. In 1981 he founded the Stonecoast Writers' Conference and served as its director until 1990. His first book of poetry, *Whole Horse*, published in 1973, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Other books of poetry include *Black Leaves*, *The Hebrew Lion*, *Longfellow Square*, *Reptile Mind*, and *No Snake, No Paradise*. Professor Rosen states, "My pride is in the success of my students and in the excitement I generate in the classroom." In 1989 he was the recipient of the Distinguished Faculty Award from the University of Southern Maine, and he served as chair of the English Department from 1985 to 1990. Professor Rosen was named the recipient of the Walter E. Russell Chair in Philosophy and Education in 1994.

