

Poetry Writing

On keeping a notebook

“The poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria.”—Yeats, from “A General Introduction for My Work”

I am asking you to write five times a week this semester in a journal. You may write a little of your daily life, if you like, and you may exaggerate to try out a voice. (I won’t read your journal as temporally true—I won’t read your journal closely at all, in fact, except to look for images or turns of phrase that might be good for a poem.) The journals of Sylvia Plath—say what you want about her, but many of her lyric poems (“Poppies in October,” “Mirror,” etc.) are great—are often mythologized scenes from her daily life, the first step of making some elements of those scenes into poems.

You may also want to mix it up a bit. Consider writing:

- close descriptions of objects familiar to you, which you can observe as you write
- a string of haiku on an autumn walk
- deliberate synesthetic descriptions (e.g., “yellow cocktail music”)
- the densest possible descriptions (as in Gerard Manley Hopkins)
- deliberate metaphors, even not-very-good ones, extended to the breaking point (to see if they will elicit something good after about minute 7 of writing)
- metaphors based on chance operations (we’ll practice this in class)
- lists of metaphors for one thing
- lists of related metaphors (this situation is like a wrecked ship, and the plates inside the ship, and the cold sea, and the sandbar...)
- a prayer, or a series of prayers, conventional or unlikely
- different ways of praising a person or thing (cf. “Jubilate Agno” by Christopher Smart)
- a piece “after” or adding on to a poem you admire for its content or style
- a piece in response to a quotation
- “One Beautiful Thing”: an observation of something conventionally or unconventionally beautiful, or an idea or quotation that strikes you as particularly interesting or apt
- a portrait in words of a person you admire (or don’t)

The idea is to push your thinking beyond its usual strictures in order that you might come up with new images and ideas for poems.

You may also draft your poems in your journal (double credit!) in order to work out an idea or to allow yourself the latitude to play outrageously with the ideas you are working with.

The idea is that your journal is a workbook for poetry, a place where you take the time to reflect and observe, inward and outward, in order to find bits and pieces that carry over into your more formal, revised work.