Donald E. Stanford

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Introduction by David Middleton

For over fifty years, Donald Stanford has devoted his life to poetry, scholarship, criticism, editing, and teaching. He began his career in the 1930s as a poet and remained an active poet until the 1950s. His best poems were collected in *New England Earth and Other Poems* (1941), *The Traveler* (1955), and *The Cartesian Lawnmower and Other Poems* (1984). Nine of his poems were included in Yvor Winters's famous anthology of 1937, *Twelve Poets of the Pacific*. One of my favorite poems is "The Bee," a profound though simple lyric on a universal theme, the passing of the seasons and thus of time:

> No more through summer's haze I see
> In sunlight like a flash of spume,
> The resolute and angry bee
> Emerging from a flood of bloom.
>
> The bee is quiet in her hive.
> The earth is colorless and bare.
> The veins of every leaf alive
> Have stiffened in the altered air.

The last line, echoing Dickinson, is a haunting conclusion to a poem utterly clear and absolutely true. The bee has changed her behavior by instinct as the seasons change, but it is the poet alone who, in the barer clarities of the fall and in these stark tetrameter quatrains, comprehends that the passage of time takes us, as it does the leaves, to death. In his "Foreword" to *New England Earth and Other Poems,* Winters said of such poems as "The Bee" that there is "a beauty which I, at any rate, cannot expel from my mind."

In the 1950s, Stanford began publishing works by and about the American colonial poet Edward Taylor (1642-1729). This interest led to the appearance in 1960 of *The Poems of Edward Taylor* (published by Yale University Press), a volume which remains today the standard edition of America's first major poet. Reviewing the *Poems* in 1961, L.C. Martin said: "the editing has been done with scrupulous care and all fidelity to the manuscript original, and it may well be that this will long continue to be the standard edition of Taylor's poems." After thirty years, Martin's statement still stands as true.

In the 1960s, Stanford turned his attention to Robert Bridges (1844-1930), the poet laureate of England from 1913 until his death and the friend and editor of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Over the course of twenty years, Stanford worked to revive Bridges's reputation with the publication of *Selected Poems*

of Robert Bridges (1974), the critical study *In the Classic Mode: The Achievement of Robert Bridges* (1978), and the two-volume *Selected Letters of Robert Bridges* (1983, 1984). *In the Classic Mode* examines the entire poetic canon, analyzes Bridges's complex metrical experiments, publishes the trial text of Bridges's long philosophical poem *The Testament of Beauty,* and describes Bridges's literary criticism. The *Selected Letters* put to rest the old charge that Bridges delayed the publication of Hopkins's poems for selfish reasons rather than, as the letters clearly show, to wait for the ideal moment to present the poems to the public.

His outstanding career as poet, scholar, critic, and editor made Stanford a natural choice as co-editor of the new series of *The Southern Review,* the distinguished literary quarterly begun at LSU in 1935 by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. With Donald Stanford and Lewis P. Simpson as co-editors, *The Southern Review* began publishing again with the Winter 1965 issue after a hiatus of twenty-three years. Stanford served as co-editor until his retirement in 1983. As editor, Stanford published a number of special issues of the review, some of which have become collectors' items. These include the Robert Frost Issue (Autumn 1966), the Eric Voegelin Issue (Winter 1971), the two Wallace Stevens Issues (Summer 1971; Autumn 1979), and the Yvor Winters Issue (Autumn 1981). Contributors brought to *The Southern Review* by Stanford include some of America and Britain's most famous writers. Among these, to name just a few, are Cleanth Brooks, Edgar Bowers, J.V. Cunningham, Donald Davie, Denis Donoghue, Northrop Frye, Caroline Gordon, Thom Gunn, Irving Howe, Hugh Kenner, Janet Lewis, Joyce Carol Oates, Katherine Anne Porter, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, and Yvor Winters.

One remarkable story about the revival of The *Southern Review* is that Stanford kept his appointment and flew to New Haven to consult with Brooks and Warren about starting up the review — this, late on that unforgettable day in modern American political history — November 22, 1963. Such determination was also evident in Stanford's fashioning of *The Southern Review* as a place where, for almost twenty years, poets who rejected free verse for traditional poetic forms could find a handsome place in which to publish their unpopular poems.

In 1983, the year of his retirement, Stanford's lifetime of interest in modern poetry culminated in the publication of *Revolution and Convention in Modern Poetry: Studies in Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, E.A. Robinson, and Yvor Winters.* Stanford offered provocative revaluations of the rankings of modern poets and argued for a return by younger poets to rationally comprehensible poems written in traditional literary forms. The final chapter, on Stanford's old mentor and lifelong friend, Yvor Winters, rounded out a career that began exactly fifty years earlier when Stanford wrote poems and studied literature under Winters in California.

I will now close with a few biographical facts and some brief personal observations. Donald Stanford was born on February 7, 1913, in Amherst, Massachusetts. The doctor who delivered him lived across the street from the Dickinson house. In 1926, Stanford's father moved the family to California to take up a new teaching post at the University of the Pacific, the college Stanford attended before finishing his B.A. at Stanford University in 1933, his M.A. at Harvard in 1934, and his Ph.D. back at Stanford in 1953. From 1953 to 1983, at LSU, Stanford rose from instructor to full professor in the English Department and in 1982 was designated a Distinguished Research Master and awarded the University Medal by LSU. In 1983, when he retired, Stanford became Alumni Professor Emeritus and Editor Emeritus of *The Southern Review.* His many research grants include NEH stipends for work on Bridges and a Guggenheim in 1959-60 for work on Taylor. Stanford has been a visiting professor at Duke, the Yeats Summer School in Sligo, Ireland, and at Texas A & M University. He has served on the editorial boards of *Early American Literature* and the *Hopkins Quarterly* and is a member both of Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi. Many of us here tonight have taken one or more of Professor Stanford's graduate seminars — in Modern Anglo-American Poetry, Yeats, Hawthorne and Melville, Henry James, the Poetry of New England, or the American Novel of Manners. His seminars always yielded fat notebooks full of useful information that helped many of us pass the general or special field exam questions on those subjects.

I must also mention how helpful Donald Stanford has always been to his graduate students — getting us to face up to the Ph.D. exams, keeping us going on the dissertation, offering sound advice about taking jobs, and assisting us as young critics and poets in the highly competitive world of academic publishing. And let me not forget to mention the famous Stanford sherry parties, planned and brought off to perfection by Don's lovely wife and longtime research assistant, Maryanna Stanford. Such parties were a welcome relief from the pressures and the usual dietary fare of graduate school days. Looking back over Donald Stanford's long, productive literary career, I am impressed that over fifty years ago, at the height of the still dominant free-verse movement, Stanford was writing fine poems in traditional literary forms. To write such poetry then, and, until quite recently, was, to use the expression of R.L. Barth, one of our best younger traditional-form poets, to fight a "rear-guard action." Today, that rear-guard action has become a full-scale counter-offensive, and tonight, Professor Stanford will address us concerning this dramatic development in contemporary poetry in a lecture entitled "Our Modern Poets—Where Have They Been? Where Are They Going? The Struggle for the Survival of Poetry."

Professor Stanford.

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Our Modern Poets:
Where Have They Been? Where Are They Going?
The Struggle for the Survival of Poetry

Our story begins in 1908 on a cold January night in Crawfordsville, Indiana, when a brilliant young instructor of romance languages at Wabash College encountered a burlesque show girl left stranded in the streets by her company. Ezra Pound (for it was he!) gave her free lodging in his room for the night. The next morning his landlady discovered the girl in Pound's room. She could hardly wait to get to the telephone to inform the president of Wabash College. Pound was fired from his first and last academic appointment. He left shortly thereafter for Italy with hatred in his heart for academia and contempt for his native land, which he referred to as a half savage country. Before the end of the year 1908 he went to London and eventually settled in a tiny three-cornered house on Church Walk, Kensington, where he started a poetic revolution which shook up the literary world. The remnants of that revolution are still with us today.

Pound was an eccentric young man who would do anything to attract attention — such as entertaining the guests at a literary party by eating the hostess's tulips. But he had a certain charm, plenty of energy, loads of poetic talent, and an American capacity for promoting his own poetry and that of his friends. He had a lifelong commitment to poetry. His circle of friends in London soon included W. B. Yeats (he became temporarily Yeats' secretary); Robert Frost; his girlfriend from college days, Hilda Doolittle; Ford Maddox Ford, and many others. Ford was an important influence. For several years Pound had been putting into English verse medieval Latin, French, and Italian poetry, and he had been composing original poetry under the influence of Swinburne and Browning, employing archaic diction and subject matter reminiscent of the medieval troubadours. Ford convinced him that if he wished to become a successful modern poet he should forget his beloved troubadours and employ colloquial diction and the rhythms of common speech. He and his friend Hilda Doolittle began writing short, vivid, imagistic, concentrated poems. Hers were usually on Greek subjects. His were on anything that happened to come into his mind. One day in October 1912 in the tearoom of the British Museum Pound made an extract from the manuscript of her poem "Hermes of the Ways," scrawled "H.D. Imagiste" at the bottom of the page, and sent it to Harriet Monroe in Chicago for publication in her new magazine, *Poetry*. There followed various explanations of the poetic theories behind Imagism. The March 1913 issue of *Poetry* had an article by F. S. Flint, and also Pound's Manifesto "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste." After defining an image as an "intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time...which gives a sense of sudden liberation," he lays down the rules for writing this new poetry. Among them, Don't use superfluous words, go "in fear of abstractions," and don't "chop your stuff into separate *iambs*," that is, the modern poet

should abandon metrical language in favor of what Pound called the musical phrase. The ideal imagist poem was short, suggestive, explosive —

with the impact of a firecracker. The emotion was usually conveyed by means of a concrete appeal to the senses — that is, what T. S. Eliot later called "the objective correlative." Pound's most famous imagist poem is entitled "In a Station of the Metro" where he experienced a sudden surge of emotion upon seeing a few pale, beautiful faces in the crowd at the subway station. So he wrote a two-line poem:

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

H. D. was composing similar poems — her most famous being one of six lines entitled "Oread" (that is, "Wood Nymph") — in which she describes the tossing fir trees in terms of sea waves:

> Whirl up, sea —
> whirl your pointed pines,
> splash your great pines
> on our rocks,
> hurl your green over us,
> cover us with your pools of fir.

Pound's most successful imagist poem is "The Return." He describes the return of the Greek and Roman gods to modern literature in the poems of H. D. They return cautiously, warily, uncertain of their welcome. The poem reads

> See, they return; ah, see the tentative
> Movements, and the slow feet,
> The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
> Wavering!
>
> See, they return, one, and by one,
> With fear, as half-awakened;
> As if the snow should hesitate
> And murmur in the wind,
> and half turn back;
> These were the "Wing'd -with-Awe,"
> Inviolable.
>
> Gods of the wingèd shoe!
> With them the silver hounds,
> sniffing the trace of air!

Haie! Haie!
These were the swift to harry;
These the keen-scented;
These were the souls of blood.

Slow on the leash,
pallid the leash-men!

But it was a Connecticut business man, Wallace Stevens, who wrote, in my opinion, the greatest poem in the free verse movement. It is entitled "The Snow Man." Stevens himself has offered a brief explanation of his intent. The poem is "an example of the necessity of identifying oneself with reality in order to understand and enjoy it." Wallace Stevens was philosophically a hedonist — the end of existence is pleasure — but the poem develops the opposite side of hedonism — Stoicism which emphasizes the virtue of endurance. As I read the poem, please notice the skillful evocation of a cold, glittering atmosphere and the completely successful slow, moving rhythm. The poem has unity and coherence, and it is only one sentence long:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

This poem has substantial subject matter. However, the weakness of the early phase of the free verse movement was usually *lack* of subject matter. Most of the imagist poems were suggestive but they didn't say very much. Pound tried to remedy the weakness by writing a long poem entitled *The Cantos* which he began publishing in 1917. He continued publication of this unfinished literary

and intellectual autobiography for the rest of his life. But *The Cantos* is merely a series of images, or luminous moments as Pound later defined images, strung together without discernible coherence, structure, or unity, and sprinkled with recondite literary allusions. Few people read *The Cantos* today.

It is tempting at this point to speculate as to what Pound's career might have been if he had not lost his teaching job at Wabash College in 1908. Instead of becoming an alienated intellectual for the rest of his life with a grudge against America he might, under the discipline of teaching and of further study for an advanced degree, have employed his great talent to writing poetry of permanent value. Nobody who teaches poetry to students every other day, and who has to test his students on the results, is going to write a poem like *The Cantos*.

The imagist, free verse movement continued to flourish in the teens and on into the twenties. In 1915 Amy Lowell, a poet of little talent but great promotional ability, imported the movement to America and gave lectures and poetry readings to large audiences. The free verse movement which developed from early imagism is still with us today on both sides of the Atlantic. I shall have more to say about that in a moment. But first I must call attention to an unfortunate happening.

In 1921, a brilliant protégé of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, had, or was on the verge of having, a nervous breakdown. On advice of his friend, the famous hostess Lady Ottoline Morrell, he went for treatment to a sanatorium run by a nerve specialist Dr. Vittoz, on the banks of Lake Geneva, also called Lake Leman. You will all recognize the line " By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept." There he finished a longish poem he had been working on for some time entitled "He Do the Police in Different Voices." The locale was mainly London which was to be presented in different "voices" ranging from St. Augustine to cockney women in a British pub. The title comes from Dickens' novel *Our Mutual Friend*, in which a foundling named Sloppy reads the police news to his widowed guardian, imitating the speech of various characters. She reports to a friend "He do the police in different voices." The structure of the poem was derived from Pound's *Cantos* — a collage of scenes, images, literary allusions without discernible coherence, but loosely bound together by a theme — the breakdown of western civilization (for London becomes a symbol of western civilization) on a general level. On a personal level the theme is the psychic breakdown of its author as motivated by marital and other problems.

Eliot lent his manuscript of the poems to Pound who was in Paris. The title was changed to *The Waste Land*. Pound greatly improved it by cutting out half the lines. A short bad poem is better than a long bad poem. Eliot published it in the first issue of his new magazine, *The Criterion*, October 1922. In the next ten years or so it became notorious. R. P. Blackmur told me it changed his literary life. Allen Tate admired it, but his mentor John Crowe Ransom didn't. They quarreled and didn't speak to each other for several months. Irving Babbitt

read it to his class and laughed. A copy was sent to a Harvard college friend of Eliot's while on his honeymoon. He threw it out the window of his railway carriage. More recently, in 1991, Richard Hoffpauir in his book *The Art of Restraint* calls it a "pretentious jumble of allusive matter" and asks "Is there really a need for the thunder to speak in Sanskrit rather than English?"

Well, why make a fuss about just one bad poem? Because of its historical importance. It sent the wrong message to a whole generation of young poets. The message was this: You are living in a disintegrating civilization: an authentic poet should express his civilization; therefore, he should write disintegrated poetry evoking the appropriate emotions of nightmarish horror and hysteria.

To do Eliot justice, towards the end of his life he rejected the *The Waste Land* as "just a piece of rhythmical grumbling," as Pound towards the end of his life rejected *The Cantos* as a failure. "I botched it," he said.

Now to return to the free verse movement, which started as we have seen about 1912. Pound and his circle (especially H. D.) in England, and William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore in America had excellent ears for cadenced language and they were frequently successful at giving each poem a unique and sensitive rhythm unscannable according to traditional rules of prosody. But this special ability was not passed on to the numerous succeeding writers who composed poems in so-called verse that neither rhymed nor scanned nor had any discernible cadence. It was not verse but prose masquerading as verse. Combine this practice with the notion just mentioned that poems should be irrational and fragmented in order to mirror an irrational and fragmented civilization and you have a situation not conducive to the survival of what we used to call poetry.

The free versifiers appeared to be triumphant, but they were not having things all their own way. Robert Frost said that writing free verse was like playing tennis with the net down, and he pitched into the experimentalists with his usual vigor:

> Poetry . . . was tried without punctuation. It was tried without capital letters. It was tried without a metric frame on which to measure rhythm. It was tried without any images but those to the eye . . . . It was tried without content . . . . It was tried without phrase, epigram, coherence, logic and consistency. It was tried without ability.

E. A. Robinson continued to write short poems and long narratives in traditional verse. R. C. Trevelyan, in England, published *Thamyris* in 1925, an attack on the free verse movement. It begins with an anecdote. At a convocation of the Muses in heaven, the devil is invited to state his case for free verse. He starts reciting poems in free verse and is hissed back to hell by all the Muses. Trevelyan then eloquently defends the continued employment

of traditional rhythms and states that "free verse is no more than an excuse for uttering ineptitudes that *we* should not have dared to express in honest prose."

About 1930, Yvor Winters, poet and instructor at Stanford University, who had published several distinguished volumes of poems in free verse, changed his medium to conventional metrical language and never wrote another line of free verse. A group of like-minded poets, now known as the Stanford School, gathered around him. They included Janet Lewis, who was Winters' wife, Howard Baker, Ann Stanford, J. V. Cunningham, and me. They were published as a group in an anthology *Twelve Poets of the Pacific* (1937). Their manifesto, one of the first serious counterattacks on Pound's new poetry movement, appeared as a Foreword in Winters' pamphlet of poems *Before Disaster* published in 1934 in Tryon, North Carolina. The essential points of the manifesto are these: Metrical language is better than free verse for conveying thought and feeling in poetry, and of the various forms of metrical language, the accentual-syllabic line with its fixed number of syllables and accents is superior because it "makes for the greatest precision of movement, the most sensitive shades of perception." The second major point is his definition of the fallacy of expressive form — the fallacy that the form of the poem should express the matter, that (for instance) because our civilization is in chaos we should write chaotic poetry about it, as Eliot did in *The Waste Land*. Winters said, "to let the form of the poem succumb to its matter is and will always be the destruction of poetry and may be the destruction of intelligence.... Poetry *is* form."

A second and last volume of *Poets of the Pacific*, Second Series, appeared in 1949 featuring poets in residence at Stanford considerably younger than the first group. They included Helen Pinkerton, Wesley Trimpi, and Edgar Bowers. The Winters movement had some impact on contemporary poetry, but the work of the poets in that movement has never been popular. A half a century later, in 1981, the so-called New Formalists revived some of the principles of Winters' manifesto and discovered for themselves the virtues of metrical language as the best medium for poetry.

What kind of writing came out of the Stanford School? I have time for only two examples. The first is one of my favorite poems by Winters. It is entitled "A Summer Commentary." It is impossible to convey the full meaning of a serious poem in one oral reading, so I'll take the liberty of stating what the poem means to me. The theme of the poem is the poet's search for the meaning of life, first as a young person, later as a mature man. What was the meaning that he found? None, in the metaphysical sense. Instead, he found a state of mind, which the second part of the poem defines. Note the use of the word "penumbra," which signifies an area partially lit — where the human mind must be content to reside.

A Summer Commentary

When I was young, with sharper sense,
The farthest insect cry I heard
Could stay me; through the trees, intense,
I watched the hunter and the bird.

Where is the meaning that I found?
Or was it but a state of mind,
Some old penumbra of the ground,
In which to be but not to find?

Now summer grasses, brown with heat,
Have crowded sweetness through the air;
The very roadside dust is sweet;
Even the unshadowed earth is fair.

The soft voice of the nesting dove,
And the dove in soft erratic flight
Like a rapid hand within a glove,
Amid the rubble, the fallen fruit,
Fermenting in its rich decay,

Smears brandy on the trampling boot
And sends it sweeter on its way.

The second poem, "The Phoenix," is by J. V. Cunningham. It refers to the death of a loved one, and in simple but moving language asserts a belief in a kind of immortality.

The Phoenix

More than the ash stays you from nothingness!
Nor here nor there is a consuming pyre!
Your essence is in infinite regress
That burns with varying consistent fire,
Mythical bird that bears in burying!

I have not found you in exhausted breath
That carves its image on the Northern air,
I have not found you on the glass of death
Though I am told that I shall find you there,
Imperturbable in the final cold,

> There where the North wind shapes white cenotaphs,
> There where snowdrifts cover the fathers' mound,
> Unmarked but for these wintry epitaphs,
> Still are you singing there without sound,
> Your mute voice on the crystal embers flinging.

Let's move on to more recent times. When we reach the sixties and seventies we seem to be in a period where metrical language has been almost completely abandoned. In 1974 it was stated in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry* that free verse had become the "characteristic form of the age," and Stanley Kunitz (a formalist poet) said "Non-metrical verse has swept the field." And Robert Ely stated that poets today "have no choice but to write free verse." More recently, in Margaret Drabble's *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, it is stated in the entry on "Metre" that "Verse in the 20th century has largely escaped the straitjacket of traditional metrics." When I was appointed an editor of *The Southern Review* in 1963 I was one of the few editors actively soliciting poems written in rhymed metrical language. Perhaps I was the only one.

Timothy Steele in his brilliant scholarly book *Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and the Revolt Against Meter* analyzes the damage to twentieth century poetry caused by the apparent victory of the free versifiers. He points out a historical fact of great interest, that there have been famous literary revolutions from the Greeks to the present — notably in English literature the successful revolt by Dryden and his school against the overly ingenious conceits of the metaphysical poets, and the successful revolt by Wordsworth and his followers against the stereotyped diction of the 18th century poets — but the Pound revolution is the only rebellion in history that has discarded metrical language as the proper medium for poetry. I wish the book could be made the Bible for younger poets today. Steele eloquently states his case as follows:

> I believe that our ability to organize thought and speech into measure is one of the most precious endowments of the human race. To throw away this endowment would be a tragedy...many proponents of free verse...have adopted the view that meter is entirely obsolete and that anyone who questions this view should be squelched at all costs.

Near the end of his book Steele points out that the free verse movement has not developed a new metric, and he concludes "If one wants to invent a new prosody, one must invent a new language."

Poets are influenced by the critical climate in which they are operating. Those of us who were writing and teaching poetry from the late 1930s on through the 1950s were (in the light of what happened later) especially

fortunate, for the New Criticism was then dominant. The most important new critics were Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Yvor Winters, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and R. P. Blackmur. With one exception all of them were poets. It is an historical fact that the best critics are poets. Brooks in the above list is the exception that proves the rule. These poets wrote practical criticism, the kind of criticism that helps one to understand, appreciate, and evaluate a poem or a body of poetry. For example, when I read Warren's now famous essay on "The Ancient Mariner," I was afforded new insights into Coleridge's mind and a better understanding of the poem. The same can be said for Brooks' essays on single poems in *The Well Wrought Urn* such as those on Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Yeats' "Among School Children." When I finished Winters' analysis of Wallace Stevens, I was able to understand poems and passages in that difficult poet which had previously baffled me.

Brooks and Warren also produced a textbook *Understanding Poetry* (first published in 1938) which is an invaluable teaching guide. It analyzes poetic techniques and shows how they work to evoke the desired reader response. It was a major doctrine of the new critics that the text of a poem is more important than the biography of the poet and his historical background. They promoted close reading of a given poem and responsible interpretation of its meaning. All this was helpful to the reader and to the aspiring young poet.

On the other hand, the critical climate today is *not* conducive to the understanding of poetry or to the art of writing it. The dominance of the New Critics in the thirties, forties and fifties, of the Structuralists in the later fifties and into the sixties has given way to the Deconstructionists who became prominent in the seventies at Yale under the leadership of Jacques Derrida and his followers: J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, Paul de Man, and Harold Bloom. These disciples of Derrida are sometimes referred to as the gang of four. Their movement appears to be grounded on a deep distrust of language. According to Derrida, a poem, or a text as he prefers to call it, is merely a group of floating signifiers, without precise referents. That is, a poem can mean almost anything. Every poem commands its own misreading. Every poem stimulates the Nietzschean joy of open endless interpretation. To read a poem one must trace the etymology of each word back to its origin and consider all the connotative possibilities of each word. The possibility for multiplicity of meanings is almost endless. What then of the future of poetry, of literature in general? Derrida tells us. I quote his words directly: the future "breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed as a sort of monstrosity."

An example of the monstrosity Derrida may have had in mind is furnished by J. Hillis Miller's deconstruction of Wordsworth's famous epitaph (on the imagined death of his sister Dorothy) which begins "A slumber did my spirit seal." This touching little poem of two stanzas totalling forty-eight words is deconstructed in a critique by Miller in (so help me!) four thousand five hundred words!

There has of course been opposition to this destruction of the humanist tradition. It has been satirized by David Lodge in his ironic portrait of academic life, his novel *Nice Work*. Charles and his girlfriend Robyn are both teachers who share a common interest in post-

Structuralist literary theory. After about ten years, Charles decides to call the whole thing off and become a banker. In his farewell note to Robyn he says, "Poststructuralist theory is a very intriguing philosophical game for very clever players. But the irony of teaching it to young people who have read almost nothing...., who cannot recognize an ill-formed sentence, or recite poetry with any sense of rhythm — the irony of teaching theories about the arbitrariness of the signifier in week three of their first year becomes in the end too painful to bear...." Gamesmanship has become a paramount skill among the deconstructionists in their fights with the opposition, and in the in-fighting among themselves, and the words "strategy" and "strategem" are frequently employed. The British critic John Bayley remarked that they cannot drink beer without a strategem. There has been a resistance more serious than mere ridicule to the invasion of our colleges and universities by the deconstructionists, especially in the attacks on them by M. H. Abrams and by the new critics themselves and their allies.

Perhaps the most lucid and eloquent critiques of deconstruction were made by M. H. Abrams in *Critical Inquiry*, the Spring issues for 1976 and 1977. He cites Miller's argument that the job of a critic need be no more than *the importation of meaning into a text* which has no meaning in itself, that is, Miller's central doctrine of infinite multiplicity of interpretation of any given text. He describes this little chamber of horrors as follows: "a sealed echo-chamber in which meanings are reduced to a ceaseless echolalia, a vertical and lateral reverberation from sign to sign of ghostly non-presences emanating from no voice, intended by no one, referring to nothing, bombinating in a void." And he makes the obvious point that for the last twenty-five hundred years authors have written works with determinate meanings, a core of meanings most readers can agree to. And if there is ambiguity (as in James's famous *Turn of the Screw*) it is a controlled and not an infinite ambiguity.

However, I hope that today's university students will not become too embroiled in quarrels over literary theory but that they will spend their energies reading more poetry — and perhaps writing it — and that if they wish to read or write criticism they will accept the advice of the eminent British critic Frank Kermode in his recent book *An Appetite for Poetry* to go back to the standards and techniques of the old fashioned book review.

As for the anxiety about language — Miller called all language fictive and illusory. But let's remember that as poets, language is our medium — it's all we have unless we take James Kincaid's advice and "devise a semiotic system more reliable than language." And let's remember too that a poem has never been intended to be real in the sense that a chair or a sunset is real. William Carlos Williams is mainly responsible for this mistaken concept that a poem is

as real as the thing it describes. His most famous statement is "No ideas but in things." And he claimed that when he describes a sunset the sun actually sets in the poem. But of course it doesn't. According to Eliot the best passage in *The Waste Land* is the water song:

> Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop

The language he said is so transparent we are in the presence of the physical object itself. All of this impresses me as exhibiting a distrust as well as a misuse of language.

Nor is a poem a means of arriving at truth, metaphysical or otherwise. A satisfactory poem is simply a statement *about* human experience, composed in the special language of verse (usually metrical language) and conveying to the sensitive reader an emotion appropriate to its subject. It is true not in any scientific, mathematical or metaphysical sense but only in the sense that is "true to human experience."

I believe Ben Jonson is using the word *truth* in this manner when in his poem "His Excuse for Loving," entreating a young lady to love him (an older man) rather than her current younger lover, he writes

> And it is not always face,
> Clothes, or Fortune gives the grace;
> Or the feature, or the youth:
> But the Language, and the Truth.

Is there life after deconstruction? One of the hopes for the future is the new formalism. In a special issue of the magazine *Verse* for Winter, 1990, devoted to this movement, its chief spokesman, Robert McPhillips, describes it as follows: "The New Formalism is a movement in American poetry that became prominent during the 1980s and seems likely to remain a vital influence on American poets in the next decade. It represents a rejection by a generation of poets who came of age in the 60s and 70s, a period in American literary history when the predominant free verse aesthetic was popularized — and politicized — by the various social protest movements that arose during that era and institutionalized by the use of writers' workshops, modelled after Iowa, within American universities."

Basically it is a revival of the counter-attack against the free-verse revolution mounted at Stanford by Yvor Winters and the Stanford School and already described. The New Formalists have discovered that metrical language, conventional prosody and stanza forms, the use of rhyme — all the traditional poetic techniques — give a range and a variety to poetry which is unobtainable in free verse. But there are some differences between the older and the younger formalists. The younger formalists attempt to appeal to a wider readership than did their elders by the use of colloquial diction and

popular subject matter. They seem to consider poets like those in the Stanford School as dangerously elite — *elite* now being a dirty word in current criticism. Also, as noted by Clive Wilmer in his review of Steele's *Missing Measures*, some of the new formalists, while expressing admirable principles, seem to be a bit uncomfortable in their attempts to write in traditional prosody. "They have," says Wilmer, "adopted traditional form in much the same way as the contemporary man of mode might don his grandfather's trilby." This is understandable. They came of age in a period engulfed in free verse, and to go back to traditional forms and prosody has taken considerable effort.

Expansive Poetry, published by Story Line Press in 1989, is an excellent introduction to the movement. The volume includes essays by Timothy Steele who descends from the Stanford School and Wyatt Prunty who, together with David Middleton, Lindon Stall, and the late John Finlay, formed a group of likeminded young poets when they were graduate students at LSU in the seventies. Prunty's recent volume of criticism *Fallen from the Symboled World* explores the philosophical background preceding the new formalism. He is the author of several volumes of poetry published by the Johns Hopkins Press. Lindon Stall and John Finlay have had poems published by the R.L. Barth Press of Florence, Kentucky, and Finlay's collection *The Salt of Exposure* was recently issued by the famous Cummington Press. David Middleton's collection of poems *The Burning Fields* will be published by the LSU Press in July.

R. L. Barth, poet as well as publisher, descends, like Steele, from the Stanford School. He has been playing a very important part in the dissemination of verse written by the traditionalists including all the LSU formalists. Charles Gullans runs the Symposium Press which has published collections by Cunningham, Turner Cassity, Steele, Lewis and other formalists in luxurious format. Mention should also be made of several new magazines. *Hellas: A Journal of Poetry and the Humanities* is advocating what they call "the new classicism." Their first issue (Spring 1990) leads off with a fighting manifesto from which I quote: "Modernism's energies...are by now clearly exhausted. A careerist establishment of academic anti-establishmentarians now indoctrinates the helpless young in the not so new orthodoxies of free verse and free-for-all structure responsible for the obscurity characteristic of modern poetry. Its drear prosaism, slovenliness of finish and pointless eccentricities have combined to reduce the readership of contemporary verse to its collective authorship." I couldn't have said it better myself. The second issue has one of David Middleton's best poems, "The Journeying Moon." Mention should also be made of a new magazine, *The Formalist*, which specializes in traditionalist poetry. Also there are three more relatively new magazines — *Cross Currents*, *Nebo*, and *La Fontana* as well as the older and more widely distributed periodicals, *Verse*, *The Southern Review*, *The Sewanee Review* and *The Hudson Review* which now welcome to their pages the kind of poetry I am defending, as does *The Classical Outlook*. I would like to

call attention again to a book I have already mentioned — Richard Hoffpauir's *The Art of Restraint: English Poetry form Hardy to Larkin.* In the Introduction, Hoffpauir mounts a blistering attack on the assumptions of modernism — especially the notion that poetry has little to do with the intellect.

Formalist poets, though in the minority, have published or are continuing to publish on both sides of the Atlantic. In England, Roy Fuller has written many poems in metrical language and only one in what he calls the "imbecile medium" of free verse because, he said, it was appropriate for the subject. The poem is entitled "Kitchen Life." It describes the attempts of his wife and himself to transfix a single pea rolling uncontrolled in the kitchen sink. In America our three poets laureate — Robert Penn Warren, Howard Nemerov, and Richard Wilbur — have published good formalist poems. There may indeed be life after deconstruction, especially since deconstruction itself appears to be in its declining years, and the free verse movement started eighty years ago may at last be dying of old age.

I would like, finally, to consider briefly two ideas that are not the property of any group of critics or literary theorists but have been prevalent in the intellectual milieu of our century and have, I believe, adversely affected our reading and writing of poetry. First, our obsession — I think that is not too strong a word — with the subconscious as Freud usually calls it or the unconscious as Jung prefers to call it. Very early in our century the poet Mary Coleridge, after reading William James, wrote "I cannot make out the subconscious self...he proves it a fool...then he seems to say it's a God." Now the question I want to ask is this. Does the subconscious (God or Fool) really have a part to play in the creation of a poem? Many, perhaps a majority of our poets, would say "Yes" and they could point to Eliot's famous definition, formulated in 1933, of the auditory image: "The feeling for syllable and rhythm penetrates far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorates every word; sinks to the most primitive and forgotten, returns to the origin and brings something back, seeks the beginning and the end." An impressive but slightly mysterious statement. Is this trip to the deepest levels of the psyche necessary? Or possible? Jung himself said that he could not understand his own subconscious. The most famous case in modern poetry is that of Mrs. Yeats who supplied her husband with images, symbols, and occult information which he used in his poetry and in his occult cosmology as described in his book *A Vision.* The spirit world via her unconscious self supplied the material which poured out in a tremendous flood of automatic writing while she was in a trance-like state of mind. My friend George Harper has undertaken the gigantic task of editing this material which has been transcribed into four thousand typed pages — single spaced. He showed me some of it in its raw state. It is wild, incoherent, irrational stuff, of no use to anybody until Yeats, in a highly conscious state of mind, transmuted it and gave it meaning in his poetry. But I think Yeats would have done better without these messages from

his wife's subconscious mind. (I am assuming none of us believe they were really from the spirit world.) The occult system he extracted from them has no validity and has damaged that part of his poetry which is devoted to explicating it — his poem "Phases of the Moon," for example. His finest poem, on the other hand, "The Wild Swans at Coole," has no necessary relation to his occult system. The swans are lucid symbols of virility and poetic vitality; their meaning is easily accessible. Another great poem, "The Second Coming," was derived from his system but this fact has not damaged the poem which can be read simply as a graphic prophecy of the breakdown and brutalization of western civilization, of which we have sufficient evidence without consulting Mrs. Yeats' subconscious self.

I would like to argue that the writing of poetry is a highly *conscious* act requiring the use of our conscious memory and our conscious imagination. Let's forget the subconscious and its dreams. They have been made the excuse for obscurantism and irrationalism in much of our poetry. Let's consider the subconscious a Fool and not a God.

Another detrimental notion we hear frequently repeated is that poetry should approach the condition of music. Perhaps this idea derives from Mallarmé and the French symbolists. I'm not sure. It is related, I believe, to the distrust of language as an adequate medium for poetry which I have already described, and with the idea that in poetry connotative aspects of language are more important than denotive meaning. Get rid of all denotation and you're left with pure sound, pure poetry, pure music — infinitely suggestive and mood evoking, devoid of meaning, of rational content. But poetry, as an art, has an advantage over music — it communicates sound *and* sense, sense enhanced by emotion *and* thought, and this combination defines its superiority, as an art, over music. So why sell out to an inferior art? Also when it comes to *pure* sound the competition is unfair. No Swinburnian cadences, however sonorous, can compete with a Mozart concerto.

A word about symbols. Symbols, images, figures of speech, when used in a functional manner to convey meaning and not merely as ornaments enrich our poetry. And then there is the post-symbolist style as practiced by a few poets of our century, including Edgar Bowers and Yvor Winters, and defined by Winters in an essay quoting passages of Wallace Stevens' fine poem, "Sunday Morning." Stevens is the greatest practitioner of this style which may be described very briefly as the use of sensory detail charged with meaning. However, some of our poets have become careless and haphazard in their use of imagery and symbols. The classic example is furnished by T. S. Eliot when he said in a commentary on the last of his *Four Quartets* "I used the words 'the spectre of a Rose.' Now I intended to refer to the Wars of the Roses. Then I wanted to hint of Sir Thomas Browne's famous 'ghost of a Rose'....But I was also quite pleased to hear that some people thought it referred to Nijinsky." Eliot is advocating the doctrine of multiplicity of meaning. A poem should be infinitely suggestive. "Here is a rose," he says. "Make of it what you will." If

this doctrine becomes endemic, what a field day it will be for the deconstructionists! But in the writing of some of the formalists today I am beginning to sense a weariness with images and symbols. The plain style — direct treatment of the subject, in denotative language, with the appropriate feeling communicated by means of rhythms governed by traditional prosody, may once again be increasingly employed by our poets.

I want to close with a truism — that form is all important in all the arts, including poetry. The Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges, said it right when upon looking back over a major part of his career he wrote:

> What had led me to poetry was the inexhaustible satisfaction of *form*, the magic of speech, lying as it seemed to me in the *masterly control* of the material: it was an art which I hoped to learn.

A Backward Glance at the New *Southern Review*: Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities: Address as the 1993 LEH Humanist of the Year

The new *Southern Review,* which is still going strong and which, I hope and believe, has contributed to the humanistic culture of Louisiana, was founded just thirty years ago. As one of the founding editors, I would like to take this opportunity to give, very briefly, a firsthand account of the beginnings of this periodical.

The history, from beginning to end, of the internationally famous original review, edited by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren at LSU from 1935 to 1942, is well known. A book has been published on it and the editors themselves have published accounts of it. The history of the beginning of the new *Southern Review* is not well known.

So here is the story from my point of view. I first saw a copy of the original review on the living-room table of my teacher, mentor, and friend, the California poet Yvor Winters, who was in the English Department of Stanford University and whose house was near the Stanford campus. It was on a Sunday afternoon in the Spring of 1936. The spring issue of the review carried a fine poem by Winters, "The California Oaks," a fact which probably put Winters into a favorable frame of mind about the magazine and its editors.

On Sunday afternoons, Winters and his wife, the novelist and poet Janet Lewis, entertained graduate students who, like myself, were attempting to write poetry. They would bring their new poems which Winters would read aloud while we drank a first-rate California Zinfandel at 50 cents a gallon. (We were in the depths of the depression when the best things in life were not free but were often mercifully cheap.) Winters said the *Southern Review* was a distinguished new literary quarterly. We should read it and some day perhaps we could publish in it. The fact that this southern magazine published a poem on a California subject by a California poet indicates to me that it was much more than a mere provincial, regional magazine. The next four years — 1937-1942 — I was teaching at Dartmouth in Hanover, New Hampshire. The most recent issue of the *Southern Review* was always available in the faculty lounge — also, eventually I believe I subscribed to it. I was delighted when, on the advice of Winters, Cleanth Brooks commissioned me to write a fiction chronicle reviewing about a dozen or so new novels. It was published in the Winter issue of 1941. Among the novels were *The Beloved Returns,* by Thomas Mann, which I admired and *Light in August*, by William Faulkner, which I detested, and said so. For me, the characters were boring and the rhetoric excessive. In recent years I have been chastised for this low opinion of Faulkner — once even in print! (Why is this man who dislikes Faulkner an editor of the *Southern Review*?) Almost the only person who has hacked me up in this opinion is the distinguished southern novelist Shirley Ann Grau. Well, I haven't really changed my mind about Faulkner though if I were writing the

review today — fifty years later — I would probably express my dislike with more urbanity than I did then.

Skipping a few years, in 1949 I was offered an instructorship at LSU to teach English to foreign students. (I was qualified to do so because I had had two years' experience teaching technical English to the Brazilian air corps in Sao Paulo, Brazil.) One reason for accepting the job was that LSU was the home of the defunct *Southern Review* and perhaps if it were started again I would become involved. I talked to friends and colleagues about it. There was definite interest in the English Department — but no money available. In 1950 I returned to Stanford, received my Ph.D. in 1953 and was offered an assistant professorship if I returned to LSU, which I did. Several of us in the English Department continued to talk up a revival of the *Southern Review* and within ten years there were results. When John Hunter became president, he fulfilled a promise to provide the necessary funds. Lewis Simpson and I were appointed editors of the new *Review* with equal rank and seniority in the spring of 1963. Work was to begin immediately and we were given until January 1965 to put out our first issue. Simpson and I chose Rima Drell Reek of the University of New Orleans French Department as assistant editor. (She was soon promoted to associate editor.) The indefatigable Patt Foster Roberson of the Journalism Department was chosen to be our business manager and secretary. She was probably the most enthusiastic member of our small staff. She wrote up our contract with the Franklin Press, addressed and mailed thousands of promotional leaflets, kept our subscription files, and, in effect, put out the magazine, as well as helping with proofreading and doing all the secretarial work.

In our efforts to get the magazine off the ground, we received strong support from the faculty, the administration, the graduate students, and the townspeople. (We sold 80 copies of the first issue at the corner grocery store!) There were, however, a few dissenters. One day when Patt Roberson was busy tying up a bundle of thousands of promotional leaflets, the telephone rang and a feminist voice said, "How dare you call this magazine you are about to publish the *Southern Review*?" Our administrative superior was Dean Max Goodrich of the graduate school who gave us his unflagging encouragement and support as did others in the faculty of both the Sciences and the Humanities. We held editorial meetings once a month, occasionally in New Orleans, the home of our associate editor, where after the meeting we sometimes dined at the restaurant in the Pontchartrain Hotel. Their adjacent Bayou bar had napkins with the imprint of an oak. We cribbed this design from one of the napkins. It became the logos of the new *Southern Review.* It is still in use today.

In November of 1963 I made an appointment with the founding editors of the original review, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, to request their support and advice. Then came the assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas. I immediately phoned Cleanth and we almost cancelled our meeting.

Cleanth explained that the South did not accept responsibility for the murder of Kennedy. It could have happened anywhere. Nevertheless, this was perhaps not the best time to announce the re-establishment of a southern magazine. However, there were deadlines to be met so we went ahead with the interview in November at Yale University and they gave me some good suggestions. Don't depend too much on local talent for contributors — go national and even international — and emphasize continuity with the original review by putting out an issue entirely made up of contributors to the original review. And yes, they would also contribute to the new magazine later on. I acted on the second suggestion immediately and commissioned contributions from seventeen contributors to the original review including Brooks and Warren, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Glenway Wescott, and Randall Jarrell. This special issue was published in the summer of 1965.

Another way to emphasize continuity was the adoption of the same format as the old review. We hired the same printer — Franklin Press of Baton Rouge — who used the same type and similar page design as he did for the original magazine, and the same or very similar paper. Shortly after-the publication of our first issue, I received a telephone call from Randall Jarrell. He congratulated us on our new magazine and he said when he opened his copy he received an intense nostalgia shock. He was instantly carried back twenty-five years by the appearance of the same old page!

As Allen Tate once remarked, a quality literary quarterly should not cater to fashionable or trendy tastes. The editors should attempt to impose their own standards of literary and intellectual quality on their readers.

Now literary standards are very difficult to define and they cannot be stated with scientific precision, but perhaps they can be suggested. Here are some of the qualities I looked for when I selected material for my issues:

> Poetry — a sense of style, structure, and rhythm. The poems I most admire are not written in cluttered, chopped up prose, sometimes called "free verse." For me, the best poems and the most moving are serious, comprehensible statements about human experience, written in rhythmical verse which can be scanned by conventional prosodic systems. Powerful yet sensitive rhythm is the heartbeat of good poetry. Without rhythm the poem is dead. It is possible, but difficult, to attain successful rhythms in free verse. I have published poetry in that medium by Catharine Savage Brosman and Dave Smith. These poems in addition to effective rhythm had original compelling imagery. The imagists at the beginning of this century stressed the importance of the original precise visual image in transmitting feeling. Unfortunately, they wrote these poems in so-called free verse. In the following five or six decades, metrical language was almost forgotten, to the great detriment of twentieth-century poetry.

> Timothy Steele has written a brilliant book on this subject entitled *Missing Measures.*
>
> Fiction — the first thing I looked for was a sense of personal literary style such as we get in Katharine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and Henry James. Plot structure, character portrayal, and the ability to hold reader attention were of course also important. It was *style* that first attracted me to Anne Tyler and N. Scott Momaday. We were publishing these almost unknown writers in the sixties before Anne Tyler's *Accidental Tourist* made her famous and before Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* won the Pulitzer Prize. We had published excerpts from this novel before it was completed.
>
> Literary Criticism — I could spend a whole evening talking about what I think is going wrong with this genre — but now I'll take just a moment. The Marxists, semanticists, structuralists, post-structuralists, deconstructionists, and post-deconstructionists have all vied for attention in our literary quarterlies and in our classrooms. There is simply too much abstruse literary theory of doubtful validity and our graduate students are spending far too much time with abstract theoretical arguments far removed from the primary sources. Instead of trying to puzzle out what Derrida is trying to say, they should be spending their time reading another novel by Henry James or another play by Shakespeare. Frank Kermode, the brilliant British critic, said recently in despair that literary criticism should be returned to the commonsense elementary methods of the good book review in which the reviewer aids the reader in understanding and appreciating (or condemning) a given novel or body of literature.

If I were editing the *Southern Review* today, I would be wary of giving these theorists much space. And if I were teaching at LSU today, I would be wary of the more extreme feminists who prefer any third-rate work by a woman to any first-rate work by a man, and I would be wary too of the rampant reformer of the canon who is frequently the same feminist. The argument frequently advanced is that women writers of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries were discriminated against by the males and discouraged from publishing at all. It is now time to redress the balance by devoting more and more time digging up what was published and giving it serious attention no matter how minor.

Recently I interviewed in London the famous British poet Kathleen Raine. When the question of unfair male dominance in literature of the last several centuries came up — the argument for example that women did not have time to write because of the pressures of domestic duties — she replied *nonsense* — the women of the last several centuries in England had as much

free time as the men. They preferred needlework and crocheting to the arduous task of composing literature. If they had really wanted to become authors, they could have done so — like Jane Austen, George Eliot, and the Brontë sisters in England and like Edith Wharton in America.

A couple of other things bother me about the current literary and teaching situation. Look at what has happened to the word *elite* which used to mean the carefully chosen best of a society or profession. When I graduated from college, I was in the upper ten per cent of American society. I was proud of being among the elite. Poetry, I thought, was written by and for the elite, that is by and for the most sensitive, intelligent people. *Elite* and *elitist* are now dirty words suggesting snobbery and self-righteousness. If someone calls me an elitist, he is trying to insult me. The same thing had happened to the term *belles-lettres* which refers to literature as a fine art (which I think it is). Several years ago I attended a conference on early colonial American literature where the sermonic and poetic literature of the period were slighted as being elitist and belle-lettristic. Much time was spent on popular writing such as almanacs and penny-dreadfuls smuggled into the colonies for the youngsters right under the noses of their puritanical fathers. I sense an unfortunate levelling tendency in all this. The same goes for popular courses in science fiction which may replace (for many easygoing students) serious courses in the British and American fiction of the nineteenth century. It is the duty of the editors of our literary quarterlies to correct this levelling tendency.

In my teaching at LSU I was fortunate enough to have several students seriously interested in writing poetry. They were of the opinion that a return to formalism was the best hope for contemporary poetry. The most successful of these LSU formalists, as they have come to be called, are John Finlay, David Middleton, Wyatt Prunty, and Lindon Stall. Finlay, who died recently, published one volume of his poems during his lifetime with the distinguished Cummington Press and several pamphlets with the Barth Press of Kentucky. His *Collected Poems,* edited by David Middleton, were published posthumously by the John Daniel Press of California and his *Collected Essays* are forthcoming from the same press. His doctoral dissertation on Yvor Winters' poetry will be published by Maurice duQuesnay's magazine *Explorations,* headquartered at USL in Lafayette. David Middleton's first volume of poems, *The Burning Fields,* was published with the LSU Press. His second volume, *As Far As Light Remains,* was issued recently by the Cummington Press. Wyatt Prunty — who frequently deviates from strict formalism — has published four or five volumes with the Johns Hopkins Press. He teaches at the University of the South, and is in charge of their summer writing program. Lindon Stall has published poems with the Barth Press. All four poets published much of their earliest work in the new *Southern Review.*

Our policy was to search out new and promising young writers and publish them in the same issue as established writers. We wished to give the youngsters a place in the sun as it were. This appears to have been the policy

of Brooks and Warren as well as the policy of the present editors of the new review, James Olney and Dave Smith.

Near the Edge

Eulogy for Don Stanford, by David Middleton

I first met Don Stanford at LSU in the fall of 1971 when I began graduate work on the Master's Degree in English. Six years before, in 1965, as a sixteen-year-old poet, I had been given by my parents a subscription to the newly revived *Southern Review,* so Don's name was familiar to me as one of the two new editors. I was naive and brash enough in that fall of 1971 to present myself to Don as a poet and to offer him for publication in *The Southern Review* a selection of what I considered to be my best undergraduate poetry — all in free verse.

Don gave me what I later came to know as the "Winters treatment," a treatment which he, in turn, had received from Yvor Winters, his mentor and friend, in the 1930s at Stanford University. He looked over my poems, rejected them all, and said "Mr. Middleton, these poems aren't really very good, although I did like two lines in one of them about a bird." As I later found out, Don had a great love of birds, and I suspect he liked those two lines more for the subject matter than for anything else.

Eventually, under Don's guidance as my major professor, I was able to develop what talent I had as a poet and, not surprisingly, abandoned free verse for the traditional measured verse which Don usually preferred. Along with Wyatt Prunty, John Finlay, and Lindon Stall, I became a member of what Don later called the LSU Formalists, poets who, though quite different from one another, all benefited from a study of Don's own verse, his critical writings, and the metrical-verse poets whom we came to know through their association with him and with Yvor Winters.

I was always amazed by Don's productivity — the three volumes of verse, the magisterial edition of the *Poems of Edward Taylor,* the two-volume edition of the letters of Robert Bridges with enough annotations and chapter introductions to amount to a substantial biography in themselves, the book-length studies of Bridges and of the revolutionists and traditionalists in modern poetry, twenty years of editing *The Southern Review,* and the numerous articles, papers, reviews, and books that bear his name. When Don appeared at my university, Nicholls State, in 1991 as our annual Fletcher Lecturer, we filled four huge upright display cases in the library with his publications. Only a few of our speakers such as Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, or Lewis P. Simpson had enough books to be what my wife, Fran, and I, who put up the books displays, call a "four-case man." Viewing his life's work spread out there before him, Don commented wryly, and in classically understated fashion, "I've been busy."

Such humor was typical of Don Stanford. He liked to tell his friends that he was related to railroad baron Leland Stanford, who was, he said, a cousin twice removed — "beyond the money." In an editor's introduction to an issue of *The Southern Review* on the short, short poem, Don pointed admiringly not only to the epigrams of J.V. Cunningham, the modern American master of the

form, but also to a sign he'd once observed: "Don't lose your head / To save a minute. / You need your head. / Your brains are in it. Burma Shave." And I will never forget a question he asked me during the oral defense of my Ph.D. dissertation. It concerned a line in Keats's poem "Ode to a Nightingale" — - "Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!" Don looked me straight in the eye and said, "Mr. Middleton, do you believe that birds are immortal?"

As his remark on Keats indicates, Don had his decided literary preferences and usually expressed them in a plain, no-nonsense manner. He shocked some in the audience who heard his address as the 1993 Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Humanist of the Year when he said that a first-rate poem by a man was better than a third-rate poem by a woman — and vice versa — he quickly added. But Don was also a tolerant man. He gave me an A on a paper I wrote defending T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets,* writing next to the grade "I disagree with most of what you say about Eliot but you said it well enough from your own point of view." Don also patiently endured my 778-page dissertation on Dylan Thomas about whom he probably felt as did Winters who once called Thomas "the most naive Romantic who ever lived."

Don Stanford always took care of his graduate students. When Don's colleague, John Fischer, asked me a long and complex question on Deconstructionism in 1977 during my oral exam for the doctorate (Deconstructionism had just then been attracting attention at LSU), all I could honestly say was "Dr. Fischer, I have no idea." Before John could ask a second question, Don said, "Your time is up, Dr. Fischer." Then Don ended the exam by asking me to identify beautiful women in western literary history as he called out their names — from Helen of Troy to Maud Gonne. I was grateful for that question.

Don's students were always invited to his and Maryanna's famous sherry parties, parties at which we often ate too much not only because the food was so good but because, as poorly paid graduate students, we were often truly hungry. For the poets among us there were also beer and pretzel parties where we talked shop. And in England, my wife Fran and I attended plays with Don and Maryanna, had tea with them at Harrod's and dinner at Don's club, the Athenaeum, always at Don's expense, and Bloody Marys at the Grenadier, which, Don said, was the best pub in London for that drink. (No one, by the way could hail a London taxicab as effectively and with such authority as Don Stanford.) Don loved the finer things in life, including good food and drink. I recall a remark in his *Southern Review* memoir on Cleanth Brooks that as much as he admired Brooks he could never understand why Brooks thought Early Times the best whiskey to be had.

Don Stanford was poet, a scholar, and a gentleman. And although he had his formality and his reserve, he was also a man of deep feeling. When my father, an artist whose work Don had seen in my mother's house on a visit to us in Thibodaux, died in 1996, Don sent me a sympathy card that simply said, "you have his art to remember him by." And all of us here today have Don

Stanford's art — his poetry — as well as his many works of scholarship and criticism to remember him by.

When the Yvor Winters Centenary Conference takes place at Stanford University in the year 2000, Don Stanford's life and work will be an important part of the proceedings. Don was often considered unusual, to say the least, in his deep devotion to the work and often unconventional literary opinions of Yvor Winters. Yet he lived to see Winters' poems and the poems written by poets associated with him attain a prominence hardly imaginable not so long ago. And as to Winters' literary judgments, which Don generally shared, I quote not a member of the Winters School but the essay on Winters by Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair in the widely used *Norton Anthology of Modem Poetry:* "Many...critics have simply tried to avoid Winters, but anyone who believes that the quality of literary works can be rationally discussed and justified must meet Winters' objections to much of modern poetry on his own terms."

Perhaps those who, like Winters and Don Stanford, knew the power of passion and the threat of the irrational are those most drawn to the values associated with the term "classicism." Don captures this well in his poem "The Falls" where the mind immerses itself in experience, then withdraws in order to define and judge experience:

> The Falls
>
> Clear as a lunar beam
> Down the deep cliff of night
> The inchoate waters stream;
> They rise suffused with light.
>
> Clear as a sudden bell!
> So may the violent mind
> Rise from the depths of hell
> Illumined and refined.

As this poem illustrates, Don Stanford was an optimist about the human condition. When the poet Ann Stanford died, he wrote of her in *The Southern Review* what he might well have written of himself: "she always radiated a kind of quiet enthusiasm for being alive, with all senses alert, in a universe which is, she believed, not so bad." That remark, I think, amounts to something like a statement of faith by a man who, following Winters, called himself a "reluctant theist" because God was needed to insure the existence of moral absolutes. And certainly Don's poems, especially those on birds, show him to have been deeply aware of natural beauty in a way that points to a divine Creator.

I last saw Don Stanford on August 11, just two weeks before he died. Fran and I had come by to drop off some of her homemade jams and relishes, which he loved. We didn't stay long, for we knew he was frail. When we left, I hugged him and told him I loved him, something I had never quite been able to bring myself to say in so many words before. On the drive back home, I thought of the colored drawing on a small card I often give away. The card depicts birds, such as those Don loved and wrote about, alighting on a pond after a long flight home. The caption reads, "With knowledge we begin the journey. Only by love do we reach the end."

David Middleton
12 September 1998
Rabenhorst Funeral Horne / Don Stanford Memorial Service
Baton Rouge, Louisiana