

KENNETH KOCH, INTERVIEWED BY JORDAN DAVIS

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In 1995, I interviewed Kenneth Koch at length over several occasions. I was five years in as Kenneth's assistant and first reader. *American Poetry Review* expressed interest in publishing an interview, so Kenneth and I discussed in advance several literary historical subjects that he wanted to get his thoughts about on the record. I mentioned a few things I was curious about, too, such as his feelings about comic poetry (and his comics), what he had considered doing for a living besides teaching, his drive for clarity and his competing drive to follow the sounds of words and their associations wherever they might lead, and then, too, about his competitive streak.

We spoke in New York City, in Bridgehampton, and in Kenneth's car going between the two. He talked, I typed, reading sentences back every few minutes. He remarked that even though I was a fast typist, it was useful to have to pause between thoughts to hear what he had said. Kenneth was voluble and typically masterful; the full transcript ran to several dozen pages. A short excerpt of the interview, much revised by Kenneth, appeared in *APR* in 1996 and was included in *The Art of Poetry*, a collection of his essays published by the University of Michigan Press

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(1996). We talked about using the full transcript at some later date, but the opportunity never arose.

I came across the full transcript late last year. The interview instantly reminded me of what being around Kenneth was actually like in a way very little else has done. There are gaps in the current text, and perhaps more transcription than there would have been if Kenneth had had the chance to cut it. However, he was able to comment on each sentence at the time of transcription.

25?

They weren't there when I was 25. They were there when I was 29, when I was in love with Marina. And when I wrote "Spring," I should get my book so I can talk more intelligently about this. Danke You. When I wrote all those love poems, "Spring," "To You," "Aus einer kindheit" and "In Love with You." What is lost, or what is there -- same thing, because you can't keep something in poetry. When I felt sad that I had lost something that was in these poems I was grieving the loss of this time in my life when I had these feelings. Which my whatever skill I had in using the language was kind enough to go along with at that time.

There's a kind of sweetness, clarity, freshness, beauty that one can get in a poem when a certain kind of feeling and a certain degree of skill in writing are there at the same time. For the first time, only for the first time. To some extent, in some ways I can't really judge the quality of my own poems, but certainly my poem "To Marina" has good qualities that are not found in my early poems to Marina that I wrote when I was in love with her. And the only part of that poem that is the same, that has the same qualities, is this little part which I wrote 13 or 14 years after the original poems I wrote to Marina and which I then incorporated into this poem.

And this part which I think has certain effects that are gone was written, well... I think I was just about to see Marina again because [of] an article by Stephen Koch about John [Ashbery] and Frank [O'Hara] and me. I don't know if Jimmy was in it or not, but Koch had discovered the New York school and it was printed in the New York Times, Sunday. I got two letters, there was a photograph. One was from a poor woman who wanted to know how to enroll in the New York School of Poetry. And the other was from my long lost love Marina, who wrote me a rather formal letter saying, "Dear Kenneth, I was very happy to see that you were doing well in the article." And then I called her up and made an appointment to see her and I found all of these old emotions that I had when I had been in love with her. They were very strong because they were like the first ones. I mean I loved my wife Janice, but not in this crazy way I loved Marina.

So the night before I remember sitting on this cool evening in my apartment on West Fourth Street. "Let's take a walk into the world -- snow or light." I wanted to write a whole poem like that. It's hard for me to analyze what's in those lines. As though implicit is the fact that the feeling we have or I have is so powerful that what is actually outside can be either snow or light because the feeling is so strong. Apparently if you plunge your hands into a bowlful of scalding hot water they'll feel cold, in icy water they'll feel hot. Freud talks about this when he talks about the origin of words from Indo-European. It's not like the rest of the language in this poem which I like a lot [reads "junebug -- you are so beautiful..."]. There's a kind of knowledge or wisdom that there's not in "is it snow or light" and is not in the love poems "I love you as a sheriff searches for a walnut..."

You know what I hope to find in doing this is my taste, what I like in my own poetry as well as other people's. I've said a lot about *When The Sun Tries To Go On* -- but I'll talk about a few things I think I've lost. "Honk! can the mailed rose [complete quotation TK] lintel of sniff" I

don't know! Just this dizzy freedom that I had when I wrote that. Addressing a question to *honk* and getting away with it. Asking it if a mailed rose, whatever that is? the mailed rose is a rose in an envelope, or the rose after you've taken it out, but I think it's a rose in a letter. The question is can it gesticulate, how would one know, why would one wish to know?

I can find similar things in certain poems of [Joseph] Ceravolo, O'Hara, some poems of John's, maybe even in Clark Coolidge, but it's much easier for me to find it in my own work so we'll get to the other people later. Granted that that entire question is silly, when you think about all the important things there are in the world, asking *honk* which can't answer if a *mailed rose* (which is hardly of any concern) can gesticulate -- the advantage, although it's silly irrelevant to any major concern, it seems actually to have some kind of reality. Something pure and unconnected to what seemed to be major concerns and thus I don't know to have some kind of innocent, reality of its own that's independent. It's not a comment on anything. One would never think to ask this question and one doesn't care about the answer. Anyway in very few words the poet has talked to a *honk* which can't answer, brought up a mailed rose, and talked about it gesticulating. Then gone on to say "Arm the paper arm!" There is a question followed by a lot of exclamations. "Is it night? Close the windows, closed the doors!" All these things that have to be done if in fact the mailed rose can gesticulate. I like the fact that it doesn't refer to anything and that without any planning at all it seems -- there's something that reminds me of Max Ernst and *la malheur des Immortels* -- except that something John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara and I had that was different from what the surrealists had was a gayety and exuberance that outweighed the irony. I love the surrealists but there's an insistence on the unconscious and everything which is dependent on the bourgeois and the world of bad poetry. I love certain things in early works of Perelman where the nonsense is pure. I loved sentences in critical works that were given as example of nonsense. I thought they were beautiful. I lost that, or used that up. I think *When The Sun Tries To Go On* is quite uneven. I like the beginning and there are certain stanzas throughout that I like. I tried to revise it, but it was like trying to comb the Atlantic Ocean. Let me see if I can find some other passages:

Oh maybe, for example this: "lucky the moaning caretaker [complete quotation TK] clocklike rhubarb"

[p.21]

[or] this one about my friends "Saith Bill de Kooning [complete quotation TK] clothes pin-stripes" p.24

I guess it's just making things happen that never happened before without reference to anything. I'm very excited when I find that in anybody's work. Maybe I've lost or I've felt that I lost a kind of certainty. When I wrote those poems to Marina I knew what they were about, I knew who they were to. I was trying to deal with a feeling that was really driving me crazy, that was like exploding. When I wrote *When The Sun Tries To Go On*, I knew what that was about too. It was a way of using language that would completely satisfy me and I don't know much more. And

when I wrote *Ko* I knew what that was about, as I said elsewhere I wanted to get in every pleasure I ever felt, and to tell a long story. So I missed all these things.

What did I want to happen? I guess I would have liked to write a lot of poems like *Ko*, not necessarily in the same meter, but just bringing in more things. Living with somebody and hanging up the wash and its getting dark at night, to bring all this into a narrative poem like *Ko*. So maybe I should do that. There really are things in *On the Edge* that I like just as much as any of the things I mentioned. I wonder what those are. I think that's been characteristic of the way I think about my work; whenever I write something I think is really good, I think that then I can't do it again. It's like buying something and thinking that you've lost the money. Well this whole passage: "If I had known then in 1950 [extended quotation TK]" [p.275]

I realize I'm being silly because I wrote *On the Edge* fairly recently. Part of my desire to write short poems again, which I've had for some years now, is to be able to speak or sing and get it over with, to belt a poem it, which I was able to do in my 20s and 30s, and then I got to like... A thing I liked about writing longer works was that I could get the same kind of mix-up of feeling, thought, sensation, past, present, future, nonsense, sense, realtime, speeded up time, slowed down time that I got in those lines from *When The Sun Tries To Go On* -- I think there's the same quality in that part of *On the Edge*, there are parts of my novel *The Red Robins* that have that, but I think in my 20s or 30s I could get that quality in short poems and that's what I'm trying to do now, maybe trying to get back something in my poems I can get back something in my life. That's a foolish ambition but it might be useful for writing poetry. That's all. Just as if I love a young woman and I write a young poem, it's a trick to make myself young. I don't think it's that but I wouldn't mind if it were, the strangest things can result in writing a good poem, like drinking a cup of coffee at the right time. [quotes from early poems on up through..]

How did you come to write the short stories in Hotel Lambosa?

For a long time I was interested in writing prose. A novel [*The Red Robins*] I enjoyed very much because I tried to make it so I got a surprising sensation out of every sentence and it was constantly changing directions. I tried to supervise it in such a way that all these changing directions were like some kind of town. Although they all seemed very random they were like some marvelous city. Let me tell you just a few things about *The Red Robins*. In everything I read while I was writing it I would come on sentences I could use. Secondly at one point I deliberately looked at a lot of novels at the last sentences for the kind of lift -- *Great Expectations*. I looked around at all the faces there and saw the one that was most shining. I tried to get together twenty or thirty sentences like this. Another thing that I did when I wrote that book is sometimes I tried to think of the main characters as though they were really birds. It gave it a certain oddness.

So this was like Aristophanes?

That was in the first chapter of the Red Robins. The first chapter was very exciting, all the sentences were like the last sentences of novels or the first sentences of short stories. I had no intention of writing a novel, but the first -- as with many of my works the first five or six chapters served as a model for the rest, and as with many other of my works, I felt the rest wasn't as good as the beginning. I felt this with *Ko*, and with *When The Sun Tries To Go On*. It seems to me a standard thing I feel about my long works. It may be actually a method I use to keep them up that high. One thing that I regret that I have regretted was that the first chapter was so difficult in a sort of avant-garde way. It didn't offer readers an easy way into the book unless they were avant-garde poets and I often thought that if I could have made a better entry into that novel that more people would have been able to read it. Because of the people I know who have actually read it (and these are not more than fifteen people) all of them have told me they like it in a way that's absolutely convincing. I can sometimes tell when people don't mean it. So I thought for a long time that that was my great unknown work. I was sad that it got no reviews and that nobody read it. But this was my fault for about two reasons. One is that it's so difficult. Another is that I wanted to look like a boys' book, and have that rough paper and that page size and the chapters, you'll see it looks like a boys' adventure book, and Jason Epstein at Random House argued with me about this because they said it would make the book more expensive. It did. Paperbacks were cheap but it cost a dollar more. I always felt this was very sad, that I had made a mistake as you make a mistake with a girlfriend and she's lost. I felt I hadn't done right by *The Red Robins*.

So why not revise the first chapter and reissue it in a normal way with someone like Dalkey Archive?

The way I made up for this secretly was when I turned *The Red Robins* into a play. It begins in a simple, inviting way. Actually, I could put the beginning of the play into the novel. It usually happens when I turn things into plays that I'm simplifying them, making them more accessible, because they have to be simple in some way on the stage since they go by so fast. Yes that is

good practical advice, my son. I mentioned it because like someone who needs a certain amount of sorrowful harbors in his life, this is one my little boat can go in and be sad. I can always be sad about this, or about my first marriage, heartbroken. But about *The Red Robins* I can be sad. And just as I told you at our last and fatal interview, John Donne, that I was envious of, nostalgic for, thought I could never come up to my Marina poems, although it's an odd idea that I could & it's true of all my long works that I could never come up to the beginning. So I had to choose between getting on with it and finishing them or being very pure and just keeping the parts I thought were great. I must say the whole of *Ko* is better than just the first canto although I do think the first canto is the best. I'm not sure because when I was a little boy and I did drawings with little poems my mother always said the first were the best. This did not help me to be a good reviser, but it did help me become a great creator.

I didn't teach revision in school because children associate revision with correcting. I think I could teach revision so that it was fun. The secret of revision is that it has to be as much fun as the first time. My mother would say with a dreamy look in her eye, "Oh Kenny the first one was the best." I think she wanted to think I was a genius in some way. The sadness of the first part of the books as the best. *The Red Robins*, I really solved it I, moved things around, chapter five I broke up so that part of it comes later. It would inspire whole new chapters. Sometimes you hear the sound of french horns and oboes and you know that's the conclusion that you've written though you're not there yet. This was difficult to do in *Ko* because it was a consecutive narrative or in any case I didn't think of doing it in *Ko*, taking parts from early on and placing them elsewhere. With *When The Sun Tries To Go On* I never did that either. I never seeded later parts with lines from the beginning. I was convinced that it had to emerge from me consecutively. It had to produce itself from day to day as Frank O'Hara's sun said to him in "True Account," I felt I was making my own days, so to speak. And I think I'd have to reread it to be sure that that poem does not go on being as inventive after a while as it does in the beginning. There are moments of inventiveness throughout. I had sort of found a way in that 24-line stanza to make myself happy, yay, there were times I found myself lifted out of my chair. There were times I discovered a new thing I could do with a stanza. That was a hard one to work on. The only thing I could do was reject stanzas or go back to where I fell off the branch. I would work for a few days... By the way, Jordan, I found out in the country and brought back into the city the holograph of *Ko*. It's all on cheap paper and falling apart, it's flaking at the knees.... I find this exhilarating I talk in a certain way and I don't want to say it again. Let Jordan deal with it.

Problems in writing *When The Sun Tries To Go On*. That was a poem that was really dependent, like a course of high jumping. I just had to be in shape for it. I didn't have my old poet's wily means of moving it around. It was just my god I hope I can be in shape to do another five, it was like sports, dancing. But it's funny this feeling I had that I had lost when I got into [unintelligible] works. It's related to my mother's nostalgia and feeling that she had lost her beautiful long blonde hair, she's sort of sad about the loss of things, but I think a pretty good analogy is when you spend \$300 for a dress you haven't lost the \$300 you have the dress. When you put all these emotions and energy into the poem, you haven't lost the poem.

...Borges' stories, no I can't do what he does, are like parlor games or little parties or anecdotes in which in the middle of them you realize that some very important philosophical problem is being solved. It's like if you're playing bridge and you play the king of hearts you realize that this means Bill Clinton will be elected president. I think he does that better than anybody. You're engaged in a trivial activity but it turns out that it's tremendously important. I can't do that, I don't write... I *do* write poems that are of a philosophical bent. But my mind can't stay on a topic such as "one man is all men." Stevens and Borges are both example of a somewhat widespread thing in the 20th century that the great philosophic problems are not dealt with in philosophy anymore they're dealt with in literature. Stevens' poems are like costume parties where the subject is philosophy. "Anecdote of the Jar." "Motive for Metaphor." "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Anyway. However, when I read Stevens philosophical works I feel sort of that I am at a party whereas when I read Borges' I feel that I've been to a party and I'm out the door with some very sobering realization.

That's the subject of genius. It's funny. It's kind of a romantic idea. So I'll try to say something about the stories. What I got from Hemingway is that speed, that hardness, that style. You can just feel that Hemingway is excited about his sentences. Then very inspiring sentences did I find in Shklovsky, in *Not About Love* and in *The Third Factory* as well as in *Mayakowsky and his Circle*. Again, not the subject matter. Shklovsky was one of the people I would read when I was writing the stories to get recharged, with Kawabata. Another person was Sciascia. They're hard cool sentences, a lot gets done in a sentence. In any case none of these guys hit me with the right subject matter. But Kawabata did. A lot of them were about secret feelings about a guy and a girl and the guy likes to talk but either he or she is worried that something is wrong with their face and they keep their head turned to one side and I thought, "Whoopee! I can write stories." One is about a fair, a man buys a woman a sparkler, she's there with another man, he's excited about this and she is, he feels a little guilty but that's all that happens, but he knows his intention. Emotions that are underneath and a lot about sex but sex in its sort of invisible manifestations. And then he's so quick that I'd read his stories over and over again the way you'd play a song again if you wanted to compose. I got a feeling writing these stories, they're so short. There's a wonderful story about businessmen's wives waiting in a station downtown, you find out while you're just hearing about people waiting in station in the rain a tremendous amount, it's very moving. They don't seem to be very minimal like stories that say "Hi, I'm minimal." I find that very boring. Though I did try I wanted to see how short I could make a story; "In Four Continents" is pretty short. A story like "Saturday alone with you" and the story will be He bent his arm. I'm not interested in that.

(April 22, on the porch in Bridgehampton)

Let's talk about some standards, okay? Ready? I had an idea.

Shoot.

Well, I was just thinking probably because I writing a whole bunch of them, that songs are what poetry is all about. Though I know perfectly well that there are also essay-like poems, dramatic poems, narrative poems, anyway. This is probably not a very interesting part. I was just thinking about how the good qualities that I think poetry should have and that people say about certain poets I've heard people say it rather often about William Carlos Williams and Frank O'Hara that "He keeps me honest." I'm aware that there are certain standards that I judge poetry by and that I judge my own by. As far as my own poetry goes these standards are for me unsatisfiable. Since their purpose for me is not that they can be satisfied but to spur me on to try to write a great poem. To get to the point, some of them are, and I don't know if I'm alone, I don't think so, in having standards that are perhaps very contradictory so that they can't all really be satisfied by anything I write. For example to want to be as luscious sensuous and compressed and intense as Pasternak is in his lyric poems and to want to be as observant, objective, flat, colloquial as William Carlos Williams is. Frank O'Hara gets close to combining these two things. It certainly would be a wonderful thing to do. Other standards like this are to be as sensuous intelligent and funny as Byron is in Don Juan, to be luscious as Keats is at every moment, or as passionately excited and excitable as Gerard Manley Hopkins is at every moment. And then not finally but to end this first part to be as smart and as calm and as grand and as sensuous and as everything else as Shakespeare is. There are other qualities that I very much admire and like them in anybody's work when I find them and would be happy to have in my own. They're qualities that I think are easily noticeable in Chinese poetry. Particularly T'ang poetry. But in other Chinese poetry too of the past, this I don't quite know what it is. It's a bit Williams like but it's not nervous the way William Carlos Williams is. It's not troubled by having to see two things at once. It's this quality of being absolutely centered and being able to -- Li Bai can be able to see the whole locust tree at once. He sees the stream all at once and he's waiting for a friend who is late, and he gets high on the landscape waiting for his friend, and it's just as good to be there, in the landscape, as if the friend were there. I don't know, to be so centered in experience, not just nature but other people. The friend is important of course it's not just trees. Wordsworth is wonderful in the Prelude and lines written above Tintern Abbey, but he seems sequestered from main parts of the world in some way. He's so bent over his own feelings it's wonderful but I don't get that feeling of centeredness. I don't get it in the other romantic poets either.

Not Shelley?

No. I love Shelley, I love the romantic poets, but Shelley's feelings are very specialized in that he feels himself to be a tragic gifted person like an angel who's been brought down to earth and is capable of sublime understanding but is doomed to be misunderstood. Byron felt this way too,

Childe Harold, Cain... No, I love the Roman poets. Something I would like is to get all the riches they discovered in solitude, if that could be brought out into the open, into the piazza, I'm not sure it's possible, if that could be brought into the world of other people, industry, politics. This centeredness and completeness, in writers of the western world, of course I love it in Shakespeare and Tolstoy...

Stein?

What I love in Stendhal is slightly different. He has one foot or one hand or one mind in the social world. God knows all the women and the interesting and boring men and Napoleon and opera. What Stendhal has is this amazing mist or bullshit dispelling spray -- he seems to see through everything. He has a way I don't know how he did it he has a kind of, and I think all poets can be judged against Stendhal, I think it's silly to be judged only against poetry. Frank O'Hara said if a poet isn't as good as the movies... in the first place I can't be that good, one can't be someone else. Thus we have the birth -- and this is slightly off the subject -- of love! You might say the kind of total admiration I have for Stendhal and Shakespeare and Tolstoy mixed with the generosity that lets them be and is glad we have it and is also mixed with the passion to somehow possess them in some way to just be in their presence the way one wants to be in the ocean or in sunshine. To get back to the birth of love. There's a difference. You read Stendhal half the night and you wake up and there's nobody there. It's also true if you love a distant lady. Anyway forget all that about love. Stendhal has these marvelous principles: to make his writing completely objective and dry, and also somewhat paradoxically to realize that one of the great pleasures of life is to be among people who are not dry. A dry style is one thing but a dry person who doesn't enjoy his life... there's a concentration on pleasure. It's like in the first layer of experience. It has to be there. You don't go through hours of boredom and then get a pleasure in Stendhal. Every sentence is a pleasure. This of course is a certain kind of temperament. There are people who work and work and work and deprive themselves of things and at the end get a bonanza. I think I'm less like them than... I can't say I'm like Stendhal... what I was saying was that he has this kind of x-ray thing that sees through everything. He's very reassuring. I read a few sentences by Stendhal and I feel at home so he's very nice to travel. I'm trying to think whether there are any poets it's nice to take with one when travelling. Probably. I was just reading Stendhal in a book of excerpts from him on certain topics. He's even good that way. One thing I like in a writer is when he is able to give pleasure in every moment. Like this end of April day we're sitting in with this breeze blowing and different colored flowers but the difference but the reason it's easier to come by a day like this than a writer like Stendhal, the breeze that's blowing on my face would be giving me an intelligence and understanding of what I've been doing all my life, sort of giving me hope for my life, there's something about that truthfulness that's not the same as information, that makes one content in a certain way with not completely content with the fact that one is going to die but at least content that one has lived. And the extraordinary surprise of clarity. I think of Frank O'Hara in the poem "Krushchev is coming..." "The Autumn wind is bringing clarity" and I think maybe Frank had art and literature in mind, Frank would say if I said it I meant it. Anyway. Now, some writers. A sign in a writer, to explain my prejudices a bit. I like writers who write totally engaging dramatic stories, but I'm

especially grateful to writers who make every sentence a pleasure. Among these are Stendhal, Sciascia, Kawabata, Shklovsky, Proust of course is an immortal sentence maker, what a man, there are also beautiful sentences in *Out of Africa* by Isak Dinesen, and the novels of James Salter. These are just some writers. Oh there are very beautiful sentences in Scott Fitzgerald. There are many people who think that a taste for sentences -- Henry James is a great sentence writer too -- may be frivolous. But a similar taste for texture is not accounted a frivolous taste in painting or music. One may like Ravel for the texture of the work. Of course if one just liked the sentences and there was nothing to hold them up probably one wouldn't like them so much. But I don't think it's a frivolous taste. It's a prejudice. **I trust someone who writes sentences that catch my heart. I don't trust writers who don't, I think. Very few poets are any good, judged by these standards of mine.** However, one has such a thirst, such a hunger for anything coming in from the outside that seems honest or generous intelligent, that one likes more poems than one would say if one thought about [it] are great poems. One is glad for some momentary evocation or the west wind or the sun in a translation of a Navajo song, one is glad that there is something there that reasserts the existence of what's outside and the fact that we have this strange power to see it and judge it and enjoy it. I guess the problem that poetry solves for me is I don't feel lonely in the presence of good poetry whether I'm reading it or I think I've written it (of which it's hard to be sure) I don't feel lonely I don't feel scared I don't feel at the mercy of what's going on around me. When I was a teenager I went to some spiritualism meetings. I was interested in psychic phenomena. From reading good poetry and fiction it must be like the feeling or experience these people got from talking to the dead. Though I like live poets as much as dead ones. Ezra Pound says that poetry is simply the best conversation of one's time. So I think in a way one is one might say starved for conversation just as one may be starved for the voice of a lost lover or a friend who has died. Anyway one doesn't want this voice that one is starved for to be pretentious bitter willfully depressed arrogant proud of itself trivial sort of happily flustered by the temporary enthusiasms of its own time. It's hard to write anything good. Where does it come from? I think one has to read a lot and one needs people to talk to who are quick enthusiastic inspired ruthless. One also needs to get out in the world (I'm just speaking for myself) to be jolted not only by what's beautiful but by what one hadn't been thinking about. A certain color car coming from a certain kind of street or music coming out of an apartment but what resists one. Totally different attitudes, different lives. I think it's good for me anyway, one can't be jolted too much or one doesn't have enough peace to write. Maybe it's all sort of Don Quixote-like. If one's a poet maybe one goes out and conquers what is it he thinks is a lion, a trash can? Some little things happen on the street or in an art gallery on the subway. Because your mind is working in a rather odd way, you're writing instead of amassing capital or curing people. An ad you see on the subway challenges everything you're thinking is true. I'm writing poems about love, nostalgia for the past, and I'm on the subway and someone comes through with a cup and a sign saying he has AIDS or a sign in Spanish about AIDS, or news that people have been blown up. It's not about doing something -- it's about a crisis. By the battle I fight with some example of chaos I'm not solving that particular problem of chaos at all. Nietzsche says the poet is amoral because he makes poetry out of whatever happens to be there. Whether it's good or bad painful or pleasant or whatever, all this perhaps a bit too abstract. Return to base BEEP.

Are you permitted to teach in the schools if you're amoral? Can you just say anything if you're amoral?

Nietzsche just meant... I don't know what he was thinking of. What of William Carlos Williams when he says the anarchy of poverty delights me. It would be a different attitude to walk through a poor part of Paterson or Rutherford and have the only thought in your mind be to institute social reform. To see the beauty of some things poverty causes is not immoral but to sentimentalize about it is. To enjoy the beauty of a man in an old torn sweater sweeping the leaves in front of his small perhaps uncomfortable house and to like that more to make an aesthetic judgment that that pleases you more than the sight of a rich man expensively dressed stepping into a limousine is not immoral. The artistic attitude is not the same as the practical attitude. Works of art lead to practical results. It's a problem you can think about it. The poor man sweeping the sidewalk is more attractive to William Carlos Williams than the rich man getting into the limousine. This does not mean that you want to make everybody poor. In the movement from what seems to be an upward movement certain things are lost. Everybody's talking about that all the time. A lot of the things that used to be pleasant in this country are not so pleasant any more. When you advance in a certain way you overlook some of the good things that are left behind. Art can see these things. Yeats says in "Ego Dominus Tuus": "The rhetorician would deceive his neighbors the sentimentalist himself while art is but a vision of reality." [CONFIRM QUOTE] A vision if you think of a vision as seeing it, it may or may not have a moral aspect. You can certainly go too far. Count Channa, was that the name of Mussolini's son in law? [CONFIRM NAME] When he was bombing the Ethiopians he talked about the beauty of the bombs going off. I think that was going too far. Apollinaire talked about the beauty of anti-aircraft fire. I saw that in World War II and it was still beautiful, pink flakes. I don't know what it looks like now, probably invisible. I do think that the best poetry probably sees more in it than just how pretty it is. I think Apollinaire is part of the best poetry, I forget what he says. The other extreme is Blake who says he hears a soldier sighing and imagines blood running down the walls. It can be a great pleasure to read Apollinaire after Blake, you can have both.

Hemingway says in his book on bullfighting there is no going back in pleasure. And after Whitman gives you this easy, easy way to talk about things and stay as long as you want, it's hard to go back to the rigorous methods and structures of poets who may be greater than Whitman. The difficulty doesn't last too long but the pleasure of poetry consists in these constant pleasures. If you go back to Herbert and Donne you get trouble. Once you're used to lying down in the grass... even with Keats it's not so easy. Thus to have Whitman's grandiloquent ease, the luxury of his timing that you can go very fast you can very slow you can have real time, just the ease of that poem existing in time and being about what you're feeling rather than any construction you've made you put feelings you have felt, it's hard to give up that ease. And I guess one may temporarily feel after reading Whitman, "That's it! What else can one do?" Then you go back and read Donne, Shakespeare, Keats, and you want to keep Whitman's delectable qualities, almost irresistible qualities of being able to say "I stop somewhere waiting for you." How can you give that up once you've read it? But that is not the real me. It's hard to give that stuff up. You want to keep that but you want to get the sensuousness of Keats, the electric passion of Gerard

Manley Hopkins, the brilliant intellect and wit of Donne, the humor and the worldliness of Byron, the vast consciousness including everything which are in Shakespeare and Tolstoy but not in Whitman, and thus we have the *poesie moderne*. Now whether people have done this gets them into my class in modern poetry at Columbia. And then the way it turns out trying to carry all these heavenly parcels all at once poets seem to sprain their legs or hips so they walk off in funny directions. And so one gets poetry that's absolutely as good as much poetry of the past but is eccentric. Like Rilke's (for example) Duino Elegies. Or the Collected Works of Wallace Stevens for example, which are beautiful and about everything but are also largely and very often about the window that you're seeing it through, that is your mind imagination.

Pasternak for example is as far as I can tell in translation a great poet. The world he covers in his poetry is limited. It's wonderful, so intense, but it's limited. It's not as strange as Rilke. Sexual passion perpetually in search of a thunderstorm. I know who else I mentioned. Rilke and Wallace Stevens are examples of very great poets who seem to have wandered off the main road. T.S. Eliot seems like somebody who instead of walking down the main road had to fight off a lot of beggars and brigands both inside himself and outside himself that he encountered along this road. You don't get a standard experience of life in Eliot. Where is the childhood, the sexual love, the adolescence, the children, the friendship, the pleasure of work as opposed to the agony of work? Where the fuck is all this stuff? You read T.S. Eliot and you think poetry is written off somewhere. You think this is necessary work to clear the ground for all these people. It seems eccentric what these people, Eliot, Stevens, Rilke, did compared to Shakespeare, to Byron even to what Whitman did.

And then there's Ezra Pound. *The Cantos* are absolutely wonderful. I think they're the best that he wrote. It would be a strange judgment of them to say they're not eccentric. This is theoretical but that needed to be done. That total fragmentation needed to be done so we could see what's really there, what's worth saving to put back together to make great poetry. People have said about Pound that he was a great poet but he never wrote a great poem but I think that's silly. I think *The Cantos* is a great poem. His shorter works are all full of gestures. One remarkable gesture after another like some remarkable dance company that comes out on stage then marches off that reminds you of medieval France and 20th century England all at once. They're kind of wonderful, those short poems.

Curious about Pound is that all the people who are devoted to him have this religious attitude, they're fanatics. I noticed that even as I was being slightly critical of him, I feared the hordes of Poundites coming after me. I wonder why he seems kind of sacred the way say William Carlos Williams doesn't. Williams has some admirers like that but mainly they're sensible folk. But Pound spends more time than William Carlos Williams does growling and fighting let's get rid of this shit while William Carlos Williams doesn't, just ignores the shit and gets on with the work. **I think Pound attracts certain grr fanciers, people who like to be mad like the Michigan Militia. There are things in Pound in the Cantos that are more beautiful and more satisfying than anything else in modern poetry I think. He satisfies a need for -- the fragmentation is just wonderful, the breaking up of everything. It's something I get from the greatest paint-**

ings of de Kooning. I guess I get it more consistently from de Kooning's paintings of the fifties and early sixties. In Pound you don't know when you're going to get it, it's sporadic but beautiful. It may be that it can only be sporadic. And then there's William Carlos Williams who is so great but is also eccentric. Because he's like the village intellectual. Or the singing carpenter. The singing doctor. If he weren't that, doesn't seem like he'd be so great. I wonder. He has something in common not in his work he seems to have something in common with Ron Padgett. That sort of hanging on to the village. I was just thinking of Ron Padgett born of the womb of Mrs. Williams and what that would have been like. I think a main difference is that Ron's work is almost always regularly for all its toughness and freshness and colloquialness it seems always to have one eye on or one arm leaning against other literature whether it's Stephen Crane or Italian poetry but in all of the work there's sometimes a freeness of pretentiousness by bringing it into the poem. Ashbery does that a little too. This is absent in Williams who simply steps out of that mode. There is not embedded in his poetry a mockery of other poetry as there is in Padgett.

Williams writes a good deal about other poetry, in *Paterson* he writes a lot about other poetry. But he doesn't collage the kinds of poetry he's making fun of into his own poetry. He doesn't say "I have eaten / didst thou know it / the plums that were in thine ice box / Oh great New Jersey mama." Just an idle thought. So Creeley picks up on that quality of Williams. Isolation, toughness, determination to just get it right one's own way. He doesn't get the muscularity, the dance movements of William Carlos Williams's way. Obviously he doesn't want them, he wants something else. I'm just thinking of people who are like William Carlos Williams in some way. I used to read Creeley when people would say he's very influenced by William Carlos Williams, but I'd never see it because I was looking for that one part of William Carlos Williams that isn't there. When it seems William Carlos Williams is looking at a mop and comparing inside his mind to his daughter, he's just as interested in the wood of the mop and of the mop part as he is in the daughter, whereas Creeley is not as involved in and doesn't seem as attracted to the little gnarled parts of the branch he may be comparing a friend to as he is to the friend. I think William Carlos Williams is a remarkably avant-garde poet. I don't know how much has been written about this because I read hardly any criticism which I suppose now is a vice of indolence and neglect grown out of an early experience of finding criticism disturbing and irrelevant. That was in the old days of new Criticism. I have no reason to think things are any better now.

What I wanted to finish saying was that if Whitman seemed to inspire a lot of poets and also make them think they couldn't do what had been done before and the result is that 20th century poets (in America anyway) have wanted to have the good qualities of Whitman along with wit, sensuousness and everything. For the generation after these poets who wrote these strange wonderful works like Stevens Williams Pound, well I don't know. I was talking about my taste. The poets I really like of my own generation who have come through that poetry of Rilke and Pound and Stevens and so on and have made a poetry that is still full of life energy and excitement and that seems either to really be about or to represent something that is important either in physical or social or artistic experience. Ashbery seems eccentric the way Rilke does maybe even more so but his work has almost always affected me as pretty close to one center of what I'm concerned about. And since he's such a good writer it's what I'm concerned about but didn't know I was

concerned about until he wrote his poems. But he comes through this whole modern barbed wire with really, for all the decadent seeming things about his work, with a lot of energy happiness and ambition. It's strong stuff. He doesn't give up. He keeps turning out ambitious things. It seems like John's always trying to solve some problem that can't be solved. One side of his brain seems to think he can solve the great problem of what everything means and the other side knows he can't and it's like a ping pong game between these two sides and that's where the energy comes from. He never tires of this friendly game with himself. He loves or his poems love this combat the way one likes to play tennis.

In any case the poets who come through merely wanted to without the kind of genius or energy that O'Hara and Ashbery have want to write poems that are merely in the center of experience and that are formally more conventional or central using the discoveries of Pound William Carlos Williams Stevens taking all this raw material (actually finished poetry) and making conventional poems. Maybe I'm just theorizing -- I think the mistake is you can't do that. You really have to create something wild and original of your own in order to use that stuff. A lot of modern academic poetry is full of echoes of Rilke and Lorca and Rimbaud and Baudelaire and other very great poets but it seems to be put in by some sort of aesthetic interior decorator. Frank O'Hara starting all over from this very wild impulse writing very original poems I don't mean in quality caught up with Mayakowsky. It's like he could use Mayakowsky. A mild academic poet writing like Rilke can't use Rilke. I think probably the only road to really being able to use our great strange predecessors in France, in Russia in America and other places, the only chance is to have something like their kind of energy, wildness, to take the risks they took. **I don't think you can sit back and use the techniques of Atilla the Hun or Alexander the Great. I don't think it's like science where you can take the discoveries of a real original like Einstein and make the machine work.** Poems aren't machines.

For many years I really disliked a lot of my contemporaries. I don't know to what extent it was resentment that they were more successful than John, Frank and I. I never felt resentful for myself -- I thought they were doing damage to poetry. Boy that's a hard one to figure out because poetry is not a woman a girlfriend a mother a wife. Poets can't take poetry away from you. I don't know what it is one resents about them; one could say melodramatically that they're fouling the air, like purveyors of fake religion, but that's too strong. Or it's just envy that they're getting the awards and the teaching positions and the fellowships, but it wasn't that. I think it's a very great sensitivity to poems which involved being rather unforgiving. The way teenage boys I knew were very unforgiving about certain physical qualities of some girls, that's the way I felt about some poems.

When I read Louis Untermeyer's anthology Modern American Poetry I liked almost all the poets. There I was just a very young poet very impressed by what they could do, then I just loved poetry. I was like somebody from a country where there are no machines coming to a place where he sees cars and power saws and telephones. I was astonished with what these poets could do writing in pentameter or ballad meter, comparing things from different parts of experience, comparing a feeling about a woman they loved to something happening to a revolution happening in

South America to a volcano to a machine. They were opening up a whole new way to think and feel and a whole lot of these poets could do it. I don't know when I stopped being able to enjoy their doing this just because of certain vulgarity in their work, a certain bad attitude of some kind. A certain show-offiness or clumsiness but I'm pretty sure it happened after I was in New York and friends with John and Frank and it probably happened in my late 20s early 30s. When it was quite clear what John and Frank and I were doing... Jimmy's poetry I knew much later. Because I was just learning from everybody up until then. I really hadn't written many poems I thought were good until then, I can't judge them too well. I think to a certain extent also the question became socialized. There John Frank and I and all our friends were, all grown up, certainly accomplished enough to take our place in the world, and there were other people getting the praise and the awards, and these other people really had been invisible. It's almost as before when we were schoolchildren who had entered a contest. You don't really dislike some kid in Oklahoma in New York who won the prize, you just want the judges to like you. You probably want to meet the kid in Oklahoma. Poetry I think is bad does still have a dire effect on me, but it doesn't -- I don't think about it so much anymore, it just seems like... One has to realize that the real one you want to like you is poetry and not official acclaim. So I like people who come through all these modern nets with what Whitman calls "original energy" or what Frank O'Hara calls "immortal energy" and who have written a lot of poems who keep trying things. Jimmy Schuyler who had all these troubles being in hospital, almost dying of smoke inhalation, wrote all these poems. He didn't write bitterly about life, or content himself with academic life, just wanted more toast, more roses.

How much do you like being regarded as a humorous poet? What do you think about humor and poetry, about wit.

Being witty is probably like being kind or mean-spirited or inclined to anger, that is I don't think you can do much about it. I don't think it's something you make a decision about. If one is witty one can only be glad one is witty. One can certainly hope one is not a buffoon, a clown, somebody who dilutes everything by laughing at it, one is not superficial and merely silly. It's difficult. The difficulty is not in being witty, if I'm witty, the difficulty is with people's response to it. That is, a funeral service is one thing. It may be profound in some way to get up and tap dance and laugh a lot at a funeral service. However, nobody ever wants you to do it. The same thing with a wedding ceremony, a bar mitzvah, any of those ceremonies where people want a certain kind of behavior, a certain kind of mood. They want a ritual. Now for many people poetry is a ritual of that kind, I think. At the very least they want the atmosphere at the ritual to be relatively solemn. Nobody taking off his shirt, nobody seeing it from a different point of view. One doesn't want that kind of thing in a political speech either. Many people think of poetry as either a funeral service or a political speech or a wedding service. People don't want much wit of the radical kind I really like as you find in Byron, André Breton, Aristophanes. People don't want that in a love letter either, wit that sets something upside down, the kind you find in Ashbery. Ashbery's wit has gone relatively not unnoticed but people have found it inoffensive because of the slightly sad and prophetic tone.

Levi Strauss says somewhere that the difference between a game and a ritual is that a ritual is a game that always turns out the same way. Poetry is like a game in some ways like a ritual in some ways but I think it's a third like any other work of art a third force. And it's that poetry is, a poem is a game with certain ritual characteristics that turns out the way no game has ever turned out before whose result is something completely new. This is not true of a baseball game. The result is never something new. Always one side has more runs than the other. So I think that you can use humor, the comic, in poetry, and make a poem just a game. Not a game in the sense that someone will win but a game in the sense that the results are inconsequential and useless. I think that the results of a game of cribbage or marbles are relatively useless. I think that the result of a church ceremony ritual is useful, but it's of a predictable usefulness. I think the result of a good work of art is of an unpredictable usefulness. It seems to me an advance over the ritual and the game though it has elements of both.

The reason I'm getting so philosophical about this, it's very uncomfortable to be called a comic poet. It enables the people who use it to dismiss your work as mere playing around, like a child, a comic, a buffoon, it makes you a jester fooling around during the funeral service. Of course the idea is if you're such an entertainer that the result of your action will be predictable. You'll make people laugh. You can make people laugh and you can make them laugh. I think it's great to make people laugh. If you can have roses and shoulders and mountains and friendship and passion and peace and countries and oceans being moved along by that laughter then you've got something great, like Byron and Aristophanes, something with immortal energy, and that of course is what I want to do. I don't think my wish to do it has been entirely conscious or deliberate. For example when I wrote *Ko* (which is quite funny though I can't imagine reading it for the laughs) I found writing that kind of narrative and using that kind of crazy rhyme and the surprises that I could really be telling a story in a kind of ecstatic way in a really deep satisfying thrilling way that excited me as much as a great set of stained glass ways. The comic part enabled me to be grand and lyrical and narrative. Without it I couldn't have done it. There would have been too many things that would have stopped me and made me feel self-conscious and false.

Briefly: being comic enables me to be lyrical, or it did in the past. I detest the smart aleckiness of a lot of the poetry supposedly having to do with the New York school. That's the comic misused.

Why are your comics different from real comics?

Come my mesmerizing lad!
Speak the words that make men glad!

I spent about a year doing comics in squares and I'm still trying to publish this book. The subtitle for this book was always Comics Without Pictures. It began with my just making a grid with twelve or sixteen squares on a page and putting words in each of the squares. Instead of writing lines I just had a square to play around with. I could put no words, many words, a few words, a modest kind of Mallarméism indeed. I've always liked and always have liked for many years any

form that will suggest new things to say and new ways to say them. My impulse to write comics was really an impulse to write poetry in a different way. The same is true of that long poem I wrote half in French currently called "Something." [VERIFY THAT THIS WAS PUBLISHED AS THE PLAY "T-SHIRT"] I just thought that feeling the presence of French breathing over my shoulder every moment would suggest different ways of talking. And it did. I thought the squares would do the same thing and they did. While I was doing the squares my whole rich excited experience of reading comics as a child kicked in. I was interested in all the different ways of telling or not telling a story on a page in squares. Another thing I liked about doing the comics was similar to something I liked about miracle plays, early English plays in which the Virgin Mary says "I am Virgin Mary" and infant Christ says "I her son am." It gave me a chance to talk in a naive, even stupid way. This made it possible to get some of that original thunder one feels reading in a comic strip when one is a child -- Japan is an island. It's a way to say things very simply.

After a while in doing the comics I started putting in some big fancy lettering. Big fat capital letters, and then I also began to put in some pictures, but the pictures are very minimal. There are very few things I can draw. I can draw a rabbit, a pig, a laughing face with a lot of teeth in it, a tree, birds flying in the sky at a distance, clouds, a simple house, a wheel, a hat, things like that, glasses, spectacles, a flag. And I began to put these things in the comic strips which I enjoyed very much. Because then they began to get this beautiful quality of hieroglyphics or Mayan pictures language which I love, or even rebuses which John Ashbery is very fond of. Rimbaud had a more ambitious dream. That is of finding the colors of vowels, the language of everything in nature which would have anything in it. When I was about 11 or 12 years old I guess I also dreamed of a universal language, mainly based on math which I was very excited about. Algebra and geometry. I didn't get very far with it. I wanted to sidestep or transcend language. I think a lot of kids may have a desire to do that. Putting together words and pictures was not as ambitious as what Rimbaud had in mind. I was excited by this added possibility of expressiveness. Adding something that I couldn't just get with words. I decided not to use color. I would be very excited to write a poem in which every other word was colored red. Maybe I'll do that just to see what happens.

You know about finding out the truth and about what you were saying about Einstein, I sometimes have the feeling when I'm writing that I've hit on some truth that I've never seen before. But I don't know that I feel capable and I don't know that I even feel a desire to complete or organize whatever truth I might come on in writing. I guess I feel that if I complete or organize this truth, supposing I found out the real truth, what would I do then? What would I do? I wouldn't have to write any more poems. When I was much younger I did long to find out the truth. And I found out parts of this truth reading certain writers, as all young writers do. I think this desire to find out what everything is all about, the truth, apparently 16-year-olds like philosophy, I did, I think it's a sort of developmental thing, to get away from your parents, your teachers, your friends, your hometown, a truth that's large enough to live with and do what you want. But the idea of absolute truth seems to me a very remote idea. Einstein, I think he thought that if a scientist could explain the universe, and how it worked, people would find much more efficient ways

to make people happy. To use the goods of the earth so everyone could have a fair share. And he also thought that science would be used that way and people would be nice to each other and fair. I think that was his dream, anyway. My problem is that for many years I haven't thought there was this door that would finally open, and I would see everything and it would be clear. I may have felt that a long time ago.

I remember a very likeable but naive thought I had when I was 24, 25 years old, when I was a graduate student at Berkeley, and I was walking along in San Francisco, it was a radiantly beautiful day, the sky was blue, there were clouds, eucalyptus trees, and I felt so happy. I was young, healthy and doing what I wanted to do. I had this thought: how can people start wars and be in wars if they know what this feels like? How can they be mean to other people and mistreat them when this feels so good? Not in a very clear way, in some way I guess I must have felt for a while that the right kind of poetry which showed how rich and happy and gorgeous and various life was might help people to know it and help them to behave better. I knew so little then about how people behaved and why they did, it was sort of dreamy.

This was never an established program of mine. My standard for poetry always was that it was full of life. What I liked about Frank O'Hara's early poetry was that it was always buzzing with the dazzling variety of existence. It was so rich on the whole and in detail. I guess I had I don't know consciously a mission. You know what happened, as I went on living and writing I would run into certain works by other writers I realized I had to have and just imitate them and parody them any way I could until I got what I wanted from that writer. That was certainly the case with Frank O'Hara, Williams, Stevens, Byron.

Something is lacking in all this. It's a certain tone, of brevity and certainty. I've always thought this about when I talk, that it's too scattered and that I'm leaving out the most important thing. Don't you think we ought to talk about people and places? Maybe there's too much about poetry. JA.

Everybody needs food!

Yeah but if there were people who didn't! The whole food supply --

How come you don't write about traditional poetic subject matter? Flowers, birds, etc.

You're going to tell me ten good 20th century flower-bird poets. Trees. I probably don't write enough about trees.

Earlier in this interview you mentioned that your characters Papend, Ko, Dog Boss, were not subtle nuanced characters such as Chekhov made. Why don't you try to write with that kind of subtlety?

I don't write with Chekhovian subtlety because I don't think I can. I love his patience, subtlety and clarity about how so many different people behave. And I associate this with a kind of moral superiority, being a good person. Although you say that Chekhov does not strike you as a particularly good person or kind person, but as a very analytical person, a doctor. It may be that I associate his careful attention to the way people are with goodness generosity and a good character. Because I don't have that ability to be so attentive to people and since it's a quality I've never had and always wished I had. I associate being attentive to people with caring for them. You're right they're not necessarily connected. As much as I would like to write so tellingly about what people are feeling, to have the kind of respect it takes to delineate the subtlest nuances of their feeling in all kinds of situations either in life or in writing. I like to solve problems I don't like necessarily to go through all the details with the person who has the problem. I've always felt a little not attentive enough to what other people are feeling. It seems like a high virtue to me when somebody is. Though it's true. One could probably make the analogy with a painter who painstakingly drew poor sick people. One could draw the conclusion that this was a kind person. So generosity of spirit, what seems to me that, taking time to understand other people's feelings is something I admire in poets too.

Who does that

Shakespeare does that. Very few poets do it.

Compassion. That's the word that was missing there. Compassion. Chekhov seems to care about a lot of people. You may be right he may be just a doctor. Frank O'Hara seems to care about people. Someone who has that quality or seems to is Gary Snyder.

Honesty, compassion, generosity have to be focussed.

We've talked a lot about your standards of intensity for a work -- but what does a work of yours have to have or do before you consider it finished. Do I have that right?

I wasn't sure about that part. The feeling, I don't know about that. You know a very good definition or description of when I think a poem is finished is Frank O'Hara's wonderful poem "Poetry": "In order to be quiet I have to be quick so I surprise you with a stab" What he says in that poem, he wants to be quiet, and that he I really do think that poem comes closest to what I want a poem of mine to be. He wants the poem to seem. The last thing he says he wants it to seem inevitable, the inexorable product of our time, as if it just had to be there. But also as if he says he wants to write the poem, to be calm, as if I were sure of you. And you would never leave me. As if you would never leave me. The best way to describe all this would be to get a poem of mine in various stages except we're not going to do that probably.

A poem like "The First Step," "On Aesthetics," "A New Guide"

The subject matter of “The First Step” is two trips I took to China. Mainly the first trip I took in 1984. There was another trip in 1991. There’s only one stanza in the poem directly from the 1991 trip. The one about “No snow on the palace of heavenly harmony / No sun either.” We can find the exact stanza toward the end.¹ I had a hotel room at the Beijing Palace hotel, and from it you could see the Forbidden City. Marvelous room! It was spring time, but unexpectedly it snowed. There was this beautiful sight of snow on the Forbidden City, all the palaces, which I could see from my window. In any case in writing that poem, the stanzas in that poem... Those four lines stanzas made me happy, because with that poem, I thought I’d found a form in which I could express everything. I thought once again I’d found some sort of great poetic secret. So they were based, a number of those quatrains were inspired by a couple of Chinese poems. One by (can't think of the name, 17th century?) a famous four line poem that goes Nin the first place I was inspired by the fact that in Chinese poetry there are four line forms, and seven line forms. Don't exactly have that in English. There's the 14 line, the sonnet, but no four lines! This guy wrote something like no one walking on the mountain paths, no birds flying through the trees, only on the river in an old fishing boat a fisherman with snow on his oars. Something like that, it's much more beautiful... When I was in China I used this poem found for me by Zhu Ciliu. He suggested that I might use it for a poetry lesson for teaching children, and I did, and my children wrote a lot of poems. He wrote it on the board. I said write a “meiyou” poem, the word I heard most in China after thank you and hello, meaning “We don’t have any,” or “no.” So I said write a four line poem. I gave them the option of writing five characters in every line. That’s another great thing in Chinese poetry. Write a poem in which you're looking at a scene. The first three lines you write about what’s not there.

No oranges on the counter
no bananas piled in a big heap
only a mangy dog scratching his leg.

Another poem was one by Li Bai about where the Yellow River comes from and goes. Imagine yourself in the middle of something and imagine where it begins and where it ends. The kids wrote... so these two formulas helped a lot in that poem. Once I started writing these quatrains I was happy. I thought Oh! I found a way to talk about something, it had this minimal form, it would finish, I could start something else. Like dominoes. It was fun to put them together. So at first I just wrote as many as I could. I would write one say about looking out the window at rooftops. And I’d like this one and I’d write three or four more and they’d be connected with this one. Many of these would be cut. I let the stanzas I wrote remind me of things I wanted to write about China. So if I wrote one stanza about the Chinese opera I’d probably write four or five more. Maybe keep the first one, replace it with another, keep the best one. I wasn’t sure what form the poem would take for quite a while. I found I didn’t want to, couldn’t stay on the same

¹ No snow on the gate to the Forbidden City
No snow on the Hall of Felicitous Harmony
No snow on the Pathway of Endless Peace
No sun there either [Collected Poems, 474]

subject very long. Not quite consciously found a way to bounce around in the poem rather than for it to be consecutive. Once it was consecutive for more than eight lines it would change. I'd have a narrative responsibility to explain something in ordinary terms. I was trying as usual to outwit my ordinary sense of things which is pretty much bounded and confined by what other people think. Usually when I write I'm trying to outwit that way my mind works. I was trying to say something I couldn't say if it were consecutive. I worked on this poem for years. It wasn't the only thing I did for two or three years but it was always there. I would hardly ever leave it alone for more than a couple of weeks. After a long long time it began to look familiar as though it were my dog, like you walk in the house and it jumps up and walks over to you. It began to seem like I knew what it was, and then I did another kind of revision, changing individual lines. Then I looked at it for accuracy. Was it true, was everything I said true. Was everything I said not just there to seem poetic or smart or ironic. Was everything necessary. I'm not sure I'm able to fulfill these exacting standards some of which are mentioned in "The Art of Poetry." Had to check it for Kiss me I'm poetic junk.² This came toward the very end. I had to check it ethically. I noticed there were a few too many standards about officials, or cadre as they're called in China. And that these officials were being treated too sympathetically in the poem. That is to say there were stanzas in which I said something like "The official gets in the car, leans back, the car goes through traffic, the official smiles."³ In which someone feels comfortable, I'm identifying, cars are rare in China, someone smiling. The officials were not the most sympathetic people there, the agents of terrible policies, so I substituted man for official. The person in the car didn't need to be an official. But that was an ethics check, like a spelling check. Or do a truth check, an ethics check. That's funny, I never thought of that before, it is like stuff on a computer and I do do that on my poems. A smart ass check. There are other checks I do before that. The unwanted rhyme check. Sometimes something will seem wonderful to me because of a hidden rhyme. But then I go back and that's all there is, and it doesn't seem to be true in that peculiar way I want my poetry to be true. I have to do a hidden-rhyme check. Another check I do is these aren't separate or particularly conscious, have I done this before, is this old Kenneth stuff, repetition checks, a check for certain sort of an egotism check, make sure I'm not bragging, I dislike that a lot in poetry. These things are happening all along in writing a long poem. After "The First Step" became familiar to me I saw its shape finally then I did these other checks more consciously. It's as though while I'm still getting an idea of the whole thing I let it be a little blurred. I let things stay in that are egotistically or not really true or representative of things I don't really believe until the last stages. Now that poem it's funny because one of the main themes of that poem at the beginning and for quite a couple of years as I was writing it was my sadness at having broken up with a woman who wanted to go to China with me but whom I did not take with me. That little sub-

² 7) Is there any unwanted awkwardness, cheap effects, asking illegitimately for attention, Show-offiness, cuteness, pseudo-profundity, old hat checks, Unassimilated dream fragments, or other "literary," "kiss-me-I'm-poetical" junk? Is my poem free of this? [Collected Poems, 257]

³ The automobile holds still
Inside is Official
The automobile moves
The Official sits back and smiles [Collected Poems, 470]

theme of sadness and missing somebody used to be more important and up until the very end I thought when this poem is published I'll send it to X and she'll see how much I care but then when I looked at the poem it's just about invisible, that theme, but I think that theme is important for my revising the poem. Like a hidden standard, the stanzas had to have... that poem isn't exuberant like a lot of my poems. I was very excited by the emptiness of China, by what wasn't there. One of the things that wasn't there was my having a really strong relationship with somebody. As for "On Aesthetics," with that poem there was a much larger field to cover than my trip to China. It started off I wrote a couple of things I thought were really good about aesthetics. It seemed an interesting way to use the word aesthetics. Of coffee cup of duck. So I wrote a few stanzas and I thought ah this is good I should probably go on with it. Because by that point I had learned from experience that only when I went on with things did they become good enough. The novelty of the idea of there being aesthetics of individual things. But then later on came in the ambition to include everything. A more interesting poem to suggest the aesthetics of everything. This often happens to me. It starts off with a fairly limited scope and then I want to test the limits of the form or the subject and see how much I can get into it. And keep it as pure and dazzling as it is to start with. I certainly did this with In Bed. I very much wanted to write some short poems. I wrote a poem called In Bed which seemed interesting so I wrote another eight and then I had to work on it for months. It turned into a long poem instead of a good one. I think I'm in sort of that collecting stage with my group of poems called "Songs from the Plays" where I'm actually going through my other works to find things to bring in to get a lot of variety. You find a singer who can sing who has a very fresh young voice who can sing a kind of folk song beautifully. Then you think what if we could get a little grand opera into that voice, Rossini maybe even Wagner. What if we could get that voice to sound like different kinds of ritual song for death, birth, without losing that freshness that you liked in the beginning. That's a crazy analogy. I find a form new for me and I try to get as much into it as I can. I cut out a tremendous amount. A lot of the things I bring in I don't keep in. What comes into my writing at a later point is the desire to get in the truth, to tell any truth I know about life, relations between people, mortality, the variety of experience, mystery, familiarity, so I can look at something I wrote, many of the things I've published like "Seasons on Earth." "On the Edge" and "The First Step" and say "That's the truth." The impulse to make it the truth comes fairly late in my process of writing, which may be fairly odd. It's like I suppose if you paint, I remember when I started painting in New York when I was in my early 20s, I was really excited by oil paint. What excited me was that you could paint these strokes of color and paint over them and in painting discover what you were painting. Discover it in the mess. It was like an archeology, a dig into what I could do and then I would find all these things. Ron Padgett said something witty about that. He said when he and Ted were writing all those poems together it was great because every day there was news. News from the unconscious. I just had a fear that if I talked about this anymore it might interfere with my being able to do it. Since I plan to go on I think I will listen to this fear.

How come you don't write short poems Kenneth?

I do. I've just written about 200 of them.

But those you intend to gather in a group. They're not short poems, they're parts of a bigger work.

In these troubled times, poems are gathered into books. Aren't they usually gathered into groups, Sir Fuckoff? Mr. Shakespeare, why haven't you written any short poems, well I have sir, 154 of them, called sonnets. Goodbye! Fuck you!

Once you have the concept of marriage then there are no individual acts of seduction and flirtation. You have marriage. Once you have a concept of a book one naturally groups. You can pretend you don't know they're going to be gathered in a book. You read the last one he probably thinks is good, then you read the first one, then you read the whole one. One thinks in books. I don't know why. I've had a lot of trouble publishing them. I've thought a lot of my poems were books. "In Bed" – "On Aesthetics." People say no no, you should include other poems. My books are made up of little books. Inside these are other little books. Ron Padgett knows how to do this. He would have made a whole book from Aesthetics of Surrealism. I get more pleasure from books than from poems. Nothing is worse than an anthology as far as enjoying poetry. Every once in a while they put something on your plate that tastes good but all you want is to go to a good restaurant and get more. Anthologies are like catered meals and events. I don't know. There can't be anything that too many people won't be able to digest. Why have I never done just a regular anthology. Laziness and fear.

Why is your drive for clarity so strong?

Why do I like to be clear? Added to this fact that I like to be clear has to be put the fact that many or some people who read me don't find my work clear. Either they don't find it clear what I'm saying or they don't find it clear why I'm saying it or they don't find the tone clear. If people think my work is mainly satirical or mainly humorous or mainly surreal as critics have said then I don't think they're getting it so it's not clear. Critics said mainly about *The Art of Love* that it was mainly a very good satire of Ovid or parody of Ovid's Art of Love [*Amores*]. That's possible although I hadn't read Ovid at the time I wrote it. But it's not impossible that it's a parody of Ovid anyway, a takeoff anyway. I did know the name The Art of Love. I think the main inspiration for the style of *The Art of Love* is Lucretius. Why wouldn't one want to be as clear as possible. Say I look out at that landscape out there and I feel excited by the multiplication of the bare skinny branch and excited by their relationship to the sky that seems more in back of them than in the middle of them. And say those branches seem to be telling me something about my own experience and seem to be connected to other excitements I've had. Why wouldn't I want this feeling which doesn't have any words connected to it why would I want to write about if not to make it clear. Maybe it's paradoxical since many of the things I want to write about can't be made totally clear. Because it's obvious that if one is writing a poem one wants to say something totally new one wants to put down on a page something that has never been on a page before. To make something new and something clear seems paradoxical to me. But I think it's a good ambition to make something new as clear as it can be. I think in order to make something absolutely clear I'm not sure that's possible. One way of making something clear is through the use of reason and argument and examples and referring to other things that have been written and thought about the subject. That's not usually the way lyric poetry takes. When Shakespeare says in his sonnet "Let us not to the marriage..." he's not proving in any way logically or by argument or illustration that there is such a thing as a love between two people that never changes no matter what. He's simply stating it. What he's doing is what you might call poetic proof because he says it so grandly so beautifully that in some ways it's more convincing than a logical or arguing proof that such a relationship exists. Truth stated in poetry has had much more effect on me than any philosophical work any critical work any carefully argued work has. When William Carlos Williams says in a poem apparently addressed to his wife "Yes I love you but I love you too" the combination of that voice that man being able to say so strongly and assertively that he can love his wife but he can also love other things maybe even other women just the fact that he can say this in that memorable way is heartening in a way that argument isn't.

How were you doing that in your short stories.

I'm looking at moments as though they could last forever.

When I was writing a narrative poem like *Ko* or *The Duplications* when I'd get something like angel of furniture which was a gift of language I'd see it and describe it. And that's a lot of fun. I do that when I write plays: Behold the angel of furniture here comes. In these short poems these

songs I like to skip over all the elaboration and give way to speed and suggestion. I guess that's two kinds of things that I write. My most popular kinds of poems are the ones where I elaborate. I really like the poems where I elaborate. I'm just at the moment trying to do something else.

You get more of certain sensations when they're clear than when you're struggling to take it in. That's another reason I like to be clear when I say I like to be clear. Part of being clear about chasing a bird or holding it in your hand is not making it seem like anything else or anything it's supposed to be like. Because everything is like other things. One way people judge clarity is by familiarity. You compare chasing a bird to finding love like the answer to a problem. Of course if you let yourself go it may be that chasing a bird is more like picking up a telephone or tearing a piece of paper. Stevens is eloquent about writing about the world of resemblance.

What quality of John Ashbery's work do you wish your work had?

As with the work of any poet I admire enormously I don't think I really wish that my poetry were like his. I'm glad it's there to stir me up to be as exciting as it is. I feel the same way about Frank O'Hara's poetry and Pasternak's poetry and a lot of poetry. That I'm... the attempt to really get the qualities of somebody else's poetry seems to be for me sort of a Sisyphean enterprise. Unless you're really willing to be somebody else, to give up being yourself you can't get the qualities of someone else's work. I admire the way he's able to end poems. The way his poems seem almost effortlessly to have a satisfying form. I like the music of his work a lot. The way the music although metrically identifiable is identifiably satisfying. I like the way he can bring in so many tones and so many different kinds of language together. I like the way he can keep a balance between being very funny even silly and very serious at the same time. I like the way he can seemingly and I put this in quotes "talk about nothing" in a beautiful and interesting way. He's like a wonderful explorer of some Antarctica of poetry who comes back looking wonderful but with no photographs. His poems give one the impression of having been there without one's knowing quite what it was like. I like that. I myself I think John and I, Frank O'Hara too, have in common, a lingering similarity of the New York school, an enthusiasm for happiness variety and excitement not wanting to miss any part of the dance, any part of the party. Even when John's poetry is melancholy, sad, I can always feel the swish of white skirts whirling by and hear the music in the background. That I like very much. It's not envy but something I'd like to have. I think John can stay further away from ordinary meanings with more grace and interestingness than anyone I know. Whenever I talk about any poet I'm talking about his best poems. I don't suppose anybody can do that all the time. John doesn't seem to be tempted by entering the dancing contest, if I talk about his poems as a wonderful dance held at Christmastime. To play in the band to sell tickets or anything, but content to be sort of an entranced observer participating with his nerves and feelings. He doesn't seem to want to play a part in the dance.

Another aspect of my not envying -- you can't have part of a personality or a talent without having the whole thing and I like my own personality well enough. Nobody my age wants to give theirs up. If I say I admire the way John ends his poems, it isn't to say I would leave those end-

ings alone if they were in my poems. They're not my endings. They're his. There's a story Kierkegaard tells about a peasant who goes into town sells all his produce buys a new pair of boots and gets very drunk with the money. On the way home he lies down on the side of the road with his legs in the road and goes to sleep. Someone comes by and says get out of the road, and the drunk man looks at his new trousers and new legs, and says those aren't my legs, drive on! John's endings aren't my own.

How you get in surprise without blowing everything up all the time.

You say that a lot of surprising things happen in my writing. For example how did I think that Sir Brian Caitskill should walk in to the duel dressed in feathers. That seems to me a perfectly logical thing for him to do. That is to say he's a rather weak person, Brian Caitskill, he's not very brave, not a good dueler, so being challenged to a duel and wanting to look good he'd find a way to look good so he comes in dressed as an Indian prince. I could have had him arrive drunk in a top hat and formal clothes with a glass in his hand as I guess Evelyn Waugh would have but I liked the idea of bringing Montezuma into an Elizabethan play. I think Montezuma was unknown in Europe at that time. I just made it up. I wanted to write Montezuma in the form I'd seen it in a couple of books: Moctezuma. I told you that Frank O'Hara told me that the reason he wrote in "A Terrestrial Cuckoo" infundabulaform corolla was because he wanted to have it in a poem. It's like going from one poem to another in a series like in bed.

Surprise is a form of freedom. In a weak way it seems like evasion of responsibility. Kenneth, clean up the dishes! Instead, I clean the dishes, and I make it fun by placing the dishes in odd places around the kitchen or around the house. Kenneth, do your homework. So I do part of my homework and then I draw a big hippopotamus, I cut out the piece of paper on which my homework is, and paste it into the mouth of the hippopotamus. Pay attention to what Aunt Clara is saying. Instead of paying attention to what Aunt Clara is saying I compose a piece of music that will live forever. You do something good to distract the person who has told you what to do that you haven't done what you were supposed to do, what you were expected to do. One is free. One can do anything. In art, freedom is essential. To show someone you're free is not to create a good work of art. If this privilege of being free results in your creating a good work of art, good. I'm full of respect for a poet like John Milton who sticks to the main point. Milton comes up with these wild comparisons in book one and two. He compares Satan to this whale or boat, and these epic similes that go on for twenty lines. This freedom to not have a frame, subject, this freedom deplored by some and applauded by some, came late, is recent. As recent as the 1950s, I think. Even then it was just a baby. It's there in dada and surrealism and it's there in Lautréamont. There's not just this wide open thing which you can be Montezuma and then be a jar of custard and not be ironic or making a point about irrationality, just do that for the beauty of it. Boring are those who do it for ironic contrast. Detestable are those who think I do that. The academy of the future has already opened its doors. A great order is a disorder and a great disorder is an order / these two things are one, Wallace Stevens, but that's not quite it either. It's a social problem too. Now that we're completely free what sense does life have. How can we live properly. Problem worth solving. Cab driver I met, seven years ago, Los Angeles, Jewish, Russian, escaped. Life

was in danger, went here through Israel, finally in California. How do you like life here? Too much freedom. Crime. Anyway. I never did wish as Auden said modern poets wish, that I lived in another time, that I were a poet in another time. Because the pleasures of this kind of freedom one can find being a modern poet are so extreme. What are these pleasures?

Rimbaud has a wonderful prose poem which is about he says he hopes to find that city from which his slightest movements come. Remind me of that and I'll find it. Rimbaud was really on to the main thing and gave up writing poetry. And became a hero to French intellectuals because he was the only one who could give up the great pleasure of being in the mess. The idea there is that everything is a mystery and from every part of the mystery is an answer. But that in between there is a wonderful landscape of poetry drunken, like Pelleas and Melisande or Hansel and Gretel looking, looking for the explanations. That's one of the charming things about John's poetry, that there is an answer, everything's a rebus, a puzzle.

Roland Barthes says, with almost sometimes seeming prefabricated sincerity or honesty, because in order to be honest in the way he does you have to say you know more than you do, he says he writes so people will love him, so people will go to bed with him, have a passion for him. I remember having had the feeling during a good many years that I could excite people at least to be disposed to love me by my poetry, the things I understood which other people didn't understand. One thing that was mistaken about that was that many other people did understand them but talked about them in different ways. Yes it would make someone very excited if they come upon your version and it moves them. You're one of the versions out there. One of the people on the football team the groupies might like. I don't know what I got on this thing about love. I think Auden was wrong with this thing about beautiful women statesmen and other poets, but is read by other poets and pimply young men in cafeterias.

How did you manage to keep writing as you got older and older?

There was no other way to keep writing it since I could not arrest time. Therefore if I'm going to write poetry which I love to do there was no way to write except as I was getting older. As to the problems of writing poetry as one gets older and older and older? There were times. For a long time I was envious of my young self because obviously my work in my late 20s and early 30s had qualities that it didn't have afterwards. That was the time I thought I could really write poems that were my own. As a person I had these qualities of energy and surprisingness before that but as a poet I wasn't skilled. So for a long time I would be sad that I had lost these qualities. One can be sad that one's skin is not as smooth as it used to be. Since I really wasn't much good at things besides writing poetry I had to find a way to keep doing it. I love to read to be influenced by other writers. I wrote in other forms, plays, stories.

You know what I think modern poets have trouble doing, I was thinking about myself you ask how I could keep writing I keep trying to rent a new Nina, Pinta, or Santa Maria to go on my discovery of modern life. Most modern poets haven't been as good at setting off on this voyage or

settling there and staying there as *Paradise Lost* or *Don Juan* or *War and Peace* but it may just be that that's not where poetry is in the 20th century. That would be impressive if somebody could get there and stay there and explore it. It's harder when you need so much, you're going there with so much subtle and refined equipment it's hard to find outlets for it. So I keep looking for new ways to write and that's it. I stopped grieving about what I've lost and looked around for what I had. You have a lot when you're young and you learn how to use it better when you get older. Some young people know how to use it pretty well, that's an unexamined cliché!

Do you want to say anything about God?

Sure. You ask me if I wish to say anything about God. I think I believed in God when I was a child; I used to say prayers every night. And I don't know. Religion is probably just a chance of where and when I lived. Religion for me was associated with oh it seems sort of corny. False. Larded over with false piety and reverence. Doesn't seem to explain anything. First you had to believe in it and maybe they'd tell you something about it. Doctors used to act that way too, wouldn't tell people when they had cancer. I didn't like the secrecy of it and the... phony poetry of it. Later it seemed like an alternative to poetry, like a long rather stirring even glorious slightly out of date slightly too long boring poem by someone else or by a whole bunch of people which accounted for its lack of real power. Like that thing we saw last night that went on for six hours, a mini-television series. This is again just the way it came through to me. If the idea is to discover the truth by experimentation by having a completely open mind. At certain points when you express yourself freely there's this hand of religion that says you're not to think that that's not the way it is this is immoral. Religion seemed to me part of the world of proscription rather than helping you to do what would be, and I'm afraid that I was formed in such a way that this is what I thought was most important, rather than what would be most exciting, most moving to do. Obviously there are people who are very moved by religion who like it better than anything and have been inspired to write great works, I'm just not one of them. You know something about me and religion, I don't get it. I just don't get it. Another thing I'll tell you about religion. It irritates me. It irritates me that you're religious. It seems phony. It seems to put you at a distance from me. This is probably a mistake on my part because if you're really religious in the way I understand it it couldn't possibly put me at a distance. I could say I'm envious of people who say they're going to live after death but it would be like saying I'm envious of people who take dope or something. As for death, whoa! I don't want to die. How could one want to die? If one were in pain or if one felt one were a monstrous horrible person or if one felt it could do a lot of good for people... But I don't have any... I don't know, you look, everything has this life cycle. It's born, it grows up, it wears out, and it dies. I don't see how people stand to live under these conditions. It's certainly not a very good idea to live with the idea that you're going to die, that's like starting a love affair with the fear of being deserted. I can't say I'm calm about it. One plays a game about it. There are people who are calm about it. I admire them. As for abortion I think that women should have a choice and I know the Catholic idea that it might be Leonardo da Vinci or Pope John or Shakespeare in there. On the other hand I think that you might run the greatest race of your life when you're suffering from pneumonia on the other hand I think you should go to

bed and you'll have as much of a chance later and I think there's as much a chance that Shakespeare will be born elsewhere.

As for politics... *[closes door] [comes back]* I think it would be best to live in a total democracy without slaves such as ancient Athens where you could really be involved. I think it would be best for poetry if you didn't get too involved. I think in this land of ours we writers live too far away from where things happened; it leads to triviality. I think it would be better if we lived closer to the center. If you look at what most poetry is about you see it's terribly trivial things. There are things like war, peace, and agriculture that are more important than looking at something and having a drippy oversensitive reaction. It's true some of us can avoid that by not looking at anything, by having it all in our head.

[Reads song of George Friedrich Handel.]

It's an example of human exuberance with no object other than itself. It's why we like children, animals...

What about the people who think your poetry is childish?

They're assholes.

Why haven't you sought development of your work in Hollywood?

Somebody should have made a movie of *Ko* years ago but nobody did. Fame is always coming around to bless me and then going elsewhere. The whole thing about fame is that you don't need much. You don't want to get less famous, or less rich. Everybody gets less beautiful so you get used to that.

So in some general instructions you say you had a scheme for importing birds—

Why should old men not be mad—Yeats. (Hugs Karen.) You broke my glasses! What? Huh?

I didn't work the scheme out very clearly. I had met Stanley Kunitz that year in Paris through Jean Garrigue. They were going out together then. I had met Jean years before in Abramson's Bookshop in New York during World War II where I went on furlough when I was in the army. I was trying to get the books of Henry Miller which were unavailable because obscene. In Abramson's I did manage to get *Tropic of Cancer* or *Tropic of Capricorn*. The saleswoman was a very vivacious young woman dressed in what seemed to be a men's business suit and a lot of lipstick—Jean Garrigue. I met her again in New York in Greenwich Village. —I know what happened. Janice and I were at the Opera Comique seeing *Pelléas et Mélisande*. At intermission there was Jean Garrigue. And she said, "Hello Ken, I want you to meet my friend Stan Kunitz." We became his friend—anyway Stanley or Jean had brought back a few colorful exotic birds from North Africa. These birds, we were told, were not available in the US. Stanley and I worked out some kind of scheme to import these birds to the US! wanted to stay in Paris and I would be the Paris agent for this illicit bird transactions from North Africa to Paris to the US. However either Stanley or Jean or a friend of theirs took maybe five or six back to the US and they all died on the ship. So we all stopped thinking about supporting ourselves this way. At the time I was interested in doing anything that would make money so I wouldn't have to work; I could just write poetry.

Another major idea I had before that for making a living which I think was even more impractical was that I would run a hotel in some pretty place open only in the summer (or the winter) and the money I made in three or four months I would live for the whole year. I think the first time I mentioned this to someone, a woman, she told me that the hotels would have to be cleaned regularly. I hadn't thought of that. I thought they would be like birdhouses people would fly into and out. [Karen - "The Martinhouse"; KK - "The Pigeon Arms"]

How about the Leonard Cohen story?

I met Leonard Cohen on the island of Hydra in Greece where Janice and Katherine age five and I had gone for a summer vacation. And we became very good friends. We traveled also to Turkey together, to Istanbul. I liked Leonard a lot and so did Janice. We saw each other then a few times after that, it was nice and intense, but never more than a day. After some years, we were already living on West 4th Street, Katherine must have been ten by then. I ran into him on a bus.

“Leonard!” I asked him what he was doing and he said, “Don’t you know? I’m a singer.” He had been a poet and a novelist. I got him to tell me all about it. I invited him over to our place and he told me I should become a singer too. I should sing all my poems. It was wonderful because you met lots of women and made a lot of money and you got to travel around and it was very satisfying to sing your poems. I said, “That’s great, Leonard,” and of course I was interested. I said, “Leonard, I can’t sing.” He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “I can’t carry a tune.” He said, “That’s good, that means no one else will be able to sing your stuff.” And I said, “Well okay, but also I don’t play an instrument.” He said, “You can probably learn—let’s try.” There wasn’t anything that made noise except a vacuum cleaner. I plugged in the vacuum cleaner and I thought I’d be more in the mood to sing if I stood up on a chair. He said, “Sing one of your poems.” I said, “There’s no music to any of my poems.” He said, “That’s okay.” I sang, with intermittent noise from the vacuum cleaner, “You were wearing your Edgar Allan Poe printed cotton blouse” in a hillbilly voice.

Leonard interrupted me after a few bars I think they're called—“You’re not serious.” Well there I was standing up on a chair and playing a vacuum cleaner. I stopped playing the vacuum cleaner and tried to be serious. He said, “I don’t believe you. Who are you singing to.” “Leonard, I’m singing to you, there’s no one else here.” “No—who in the audience. Who do you want to go to bed with after the show? Who are you addressing? Who do you want to like you?” “Twenty-two year old women.” “No. Everybody wants 22-year-old women. Sing to somebody else. You know who I sing to? 14-year-olds and 40-year olds.” I’m not sure those are the exact numbers—something like 14 and 40. I said, “Okay, I’ll try to sing to 14 yr olds.” But trying to sing my poems? It didn’t work too well. I said I’d try. At my age how can I get started? I can’t carry a tune I don’t play an instrument and I’ve never sung before. I was already 40 at least by then. “There’s one way you can help me.” And he said, “Anything, what is it.” “Are you going to have tributes on your sleeve, put me on the record jacket. Say, ‘Even the legendary Kenny has come out of retirement to praise Leonard Cohen.’” I figured that people who respond to this kind of thing are not exactly scholarly. He promised he would put this on the record cover. Months went by. I never heard from Leonard. I did receive from him this big rectangle, his record. On the cover was this girl (I don’t know if she was 14 or 40) rising from flames, somewhere in between, and on the back was Leonard, his lyrics, and no tributes. And no Kenny, and that was the end of another career, another attempt to become rich. And you probably don’t know my translations of the songs of Guy Béart.

You were talking about the transformation of ordinary expressions that I talked about lightly in *Days and Nights* and I was saying that I didn't really like puns and jokes, I don't like saying something and having somebody get it. Instead of *my country tis of thee* I say — my interest is in inspiring somebody to see something like, *miles country tizzy bee*, or *miles funny dizzy* or *styles money dizzy bee*, I think I like *styles bunny tizzy bee* the best. My idea is not to get somebody to recognize *my country tis of thee* but to find something convincing.

What I said about Stevens — he says in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” “I was of three minds like a tree in which there are three blackbirds.” Which is brilliant, because the expression is familiar. When it comes to the door, you let it in. Who's there? You think it was of two minds and then you find out later you have a monster. That's probably well known about Stevens. As when Thomas says, “I was happy as the house was high.” You've admitted the phrase into your mind because it's familiar and then you're surprised because it's a sort of dangerous stranger. It's used a lot for jokes, as in that song—“Two little words, which mean I love you”—

I'm not interested in that kind of change, it's already been done by Wallace Stevens. Instead of saying “I was of three minds,” I would say “Ivy canoe finds” which is unrecognizable. “Title sea, bending of boob lack”—I didn't do this deliberately. The subject is—you have already existing phrases. They have a music nonexistent phrases don't have. For example...

[break in transcript?]

No, John likes inviting a lot of unacceptable people to the party. Sort of impoverished looking, dwarfy, very common expressions, corny ideas, that later turn out to be dukes and duchesses. Or maybe they don't.

.... suddenly dropped dead of heart disease.”

Or Wordsworth. Then there's a great poem by this Hindu poet, which is maybe less inspiring

“Dust to dust ashes to ashes
Into the tomb the great queen dashes.”

I'm really interested in this subject because many people think that the comic now is something they think of as the absurd. And that the reason that a writer or artist is comic is because we (whoever we are) have discovered that life is meaningless, or that the world is so crooked, so unsatisfactory that the only way to take a stand in it is to be absurd. This idea is very boring in my opinion...

It seems to be more the real work of an artist to find the beauty and significance and artistic value of the real movement, rhythm, the real dance that he sees in the world seems that is more his real work than to adopt a disdainful position, a contemptuous position in regard to that move-

ment. Now this leaves out ethical problems. But art has an odd relationship to ethics. It's not exactly one to one. I admit this needs something to be figured out. Obviously if somebody is killing your children, you don't make beautiful the movement of the pistol. I don't mean that. I am talking about the art one creates under privileged conditions. The art one would create if one had the time and the leisure and peace and health to create the best art one would.

How has your work changed since you wrote *Ko* and *Thank You*? Has it gone down in quality?

I'll assume I know what you mean. Sometimes I've thought so. But it's very hard to tell. I think the way to make it clearest, I mean at the moment I feel wonderful about my work that I've been writing in the last five years. However, I think the most interesting way to answer the question is to say "Yes, it's lost certain things." And just talk about what's lost without the piety of saying of course there are other qualities, there are good qualities that have come. It's like talking about a beautiful woman of 35, she's more beautiful than she ever was – you still have to say her skin doesn't have the same quality, her hair has lost its beautiful lustre, her eyes don't shine as much. Let me talk about what my poetry has lost, or rather qualities it doesn't have any more because – a zero sum economy – when I felt depressed that my poetry had lost its early qualities I felt like someone, zero sum, if your steel mills have to close that means your economy is diminished by forty percent, other things can open up. Things that were dear to me didn't come when I was your age, how old are you? Ah, what I could do then! I could no more write those poems than I could jump twenty feet into the air. It's just that these old things have a high profile sadness to them. I used to spend a lot more time being sad than I do now. I used to come out all alone to my country house and cry sometimes, and be sad and play songs that reminded me of other times and be sad. But now there's always something going on in the kitchen that keeps it from happening. That's a joke, but it's true. I think I may have gotten enough out of that kind of sadness that was in "The Circus [II]" and reached its apogee in "To Marina" and "Days and Nights." That kind of sadness... Picasso's right, you shouldn't be your own connoisseur.

Letter to Stevens?

No. I never knew Stevens. I sent him my first book, with Nell Blaine, and he wrote me back a letter. But that letter belongs more in a book of criticism of my work than a book by me about work. Stevens was a big friend on the page, and so was Williams. Williams was a very big friend on the page. Pound and Eliot weren't big friends on the page in the same way. Although I loved "The Waste Land," I felt it excluded me.

Like a country club?

A little. It excluded me a little bit like a country club. You know when I was a boy even twelve or thirteen years old, there were hotels and rooming houses and inns that advertised "restricted clientele." This usually meant No Jews. Many colleges and universities had a Jewish quota. But

it wasn't because of his anti-Semitism that I felt excluded. He didn't seem like a big pal though I liked that poem. I was very puzzled by his short poems, like "My Aunt Lucy." But there they were on those beautiful pages with that beautiful black cover and the yellow paper. There were so few poems and that was wonderful. It was a very different experience from Auden, with whom it was wonderful that there were so many poems. Pound, I know, was a big friend on the page for many of my colleagues. I got a lot from Pound, especially from *The Cantos*, but I never felt close to him. It wasn't the anti-Semitism which I didn't know about. I remember trying to imitate certain things in Pound, a sound he got in his translations of Greek epigrams. What I wanted to get was that sound in his early poems in *Personae*, the sound of something momentous happening in just two or three lines. That sort of grand rhetoric which you could get in a short poem about some apparently slight subject. Oh, I know – he didn't seem to be writing about my feelings. That was it. He gave me experiences I didn't have, but it was literature. But I'm trying to figure out if Stevens was writing about my feelings, and if he was more of a friend. I remember Stevens was a total influence on that little poem "Summery Weather." I think we better go to dinner but just let me finish this. There's just about nothing in this poem that is recognizably from Stevens, which is an interesting example of how influence works, I guess. [Reads last two lines.]

Given the shirts have a sail to themselves,

Too personal compared to what? as opposed to what? [picks up collage]

Ask me some questions.

So what does "Nail Kenneth down..."

For I fear the crying bloomers of a gnome race—you mean in "Where Am I Kenneth?" "I don't know. I wrote that poem on a bus—

You say this elsewhere.

A discourse on "Nail Kenneth down." It seems like the man may have delusions of grandeur. He feels he is dangerous and must be nailed down, or he thinks he's like Jesus Christ and is going to be crucified. (laughs) (reads) I think this seems to be a poem about restraint and freedom restriction and liberation, death and rebirth.

KOCH COLLABORATES. You bet he does. You better believe it, as Ted would say. Where is that headline again. Who collaborates? You mean everybody knows who he is? Koch Collaborates. I've got a friend on that magazine. I've really got a friend on that magazine.

It's probably banal. But I was thinking about Williams's beautiful late poem, "The Wood Thrush." Do you know that poem?

No. Which poem is that?

[break in transcript?]

“...But the wind is blowing, blowing.” This is right before I got into the *Sun Tries* poems, “bananas, piers, limericks.” Stevens is an influence on that. This is influenced by the early, physical ones. Which are a little bit like Shakespeare’s songs, aren’t they. The starched sheets on the line. You know, there’s one about spring and one about winter. In any case it was this great particularity about physical things that I loved about those early poems of Stevens’s when I was writing that poem. I was out on Long Island, I saw some shirts on a line, I ran in and wrote it. I tell you right away, pal. And then I think we have to eat. “Depression Before Spring.” Wonderful poem. “The cock crows but no queen rises...” “And the wind is blowing, blowing!” Kay-oh darling Okay!

There is a struggle in all my writing between being elusive, like these undeveloped language, this dream of going from one irresistible moment to another, and then there’s the pleasure of elaborating, making things clearer, explaining them, turning them into stories, filling them out.

My last book, *One Train*, I think it’s—except for “The First Step” and “No One Else”—it’s a pretty elaborated book.

[break in transcript?]

Some wild palooka?

Yeah, he believes it. Sorry to disappoint. It presumes that they’re masters of your feeling. Imagine yourself saying that to somebody. A girl wants to go out with you, and “Sorry to disappoint.” Anyway you’re probably right, they’re in a hurry and they don’t know what to do. Most rudeness comes from not knowing what to do. I refer you to my favorite quote from Cardinal Newman, “A gentleman is someone who never causes pain involuntarily,” that is he has perfect manners so he never hurts you without meaning to. And that’s probably enough about those three words.

Ko?

Sure. *Ko* was the second style I discovered. It started with the love poems I wrote to Marina. In which I used, that was sort of a transitional style, about three months, I sort of used all this dazzle I got from *When The Sun Tries To Go On* on this strong feeling I had and I couldn’t help writing about. That’s why those poems are tough, strong. Full of things and words.

The next thing that happened in my poetry which led to *Ko* were poems I wrote in Paris the first year of my marriage. Such as “The Circus [I],” “Geography,” “The History of Jazz,” and then

when I was in Rome that same year, “Pregnancy.” I forget what else. The style I found then was a sort of simple slightly childlike narrative poem. I discovered that I could write straightforward stories if I simplified the style just a little bit. A big influence on this was a performance of “Peter Pan” I saw in London, simple, childlike and very moving.

Then, when I was in Europe the next time two years later, Janice and I were in Florence. I already knew how to tell a story in poetry. The new thing was the rhyming. I kept the simple story telling from “The Circus” and “Geography,” and I’d also learned how to tell three or four stories at the same time. I’d learned this from reading Ariosto and *The Faerie Queene*. I didn’t read Byron at all when I was writing *Ko*, I was afraid he would influence and discourage me. I had read Don Juan before. He was so sophisticated, I knew I couldn’t do what he did, make witty comments about everything. Frank maybe could have done it, but I don’t think Frank was interested in writing a long poem in ottava rima. I think you could find a pretty Byronesque knowledge and wit about everything in “Biotherm.” What I did writing *Ko* was to be deliberately unByron-like, in that I made no comments, all story. Making it all story was making it much more like Ariosto. I was reading Ariosto all the time I was writing *Ko*. His great 17th century translator Harrington puts in a great many comments throughout, giving it a Christian tilt, to explain things. It’s very good, but with these odd comments. I loved the stanza, I still do. And also I found that the stanza could write the poem for me. Once I’d written “Dodgers” you could be sure there was a third base coach named Rodgers, or Ginger Rogers would show up. It’s similar to *When The Sun Tries To Go On*, in that I wanted to be constantly interesting. And more than planning that I wanted to find ways to keep it going on. Frank says in “Saturday” “cosmic energy”—I wanted it to have this tremendous bounce and energy while at the same time making it beautiful. I didn’t want it to be grotesque. I was very happy with it. I don’t think I’ve ever been happier writing. I wrote every day for months. I felt so good about it I could go back and cut out a week’s work, maybe forty pages. I really had a very sure sense that it was right on. The dangers that I saw were in mechanical fantastical storytelling. I wanted it to be full of Tuscan springtime. I realized at a certain point when I took a walk that I wanted to get into this poem every pleasure I’d ever felt.

But there are poems like “The Boiling Water” or “The Problem of Anxiety,” where rationality is the method of dealing with anxiety—

Ideally I’d like my work to be thoughtful and extremely passionate at the same time. When I was about 50 years old, really my late 40s, when I broke up with my first wife, Janice, I was unhappy and troubled and thoughtful. I think my poetry changed noticeably at that time. I wrote “The Circus [II].” That was the first time that I mentioned my friends in my poetry except as objects of ecstatic enthusiasm or called on, as the west wind. Jane and Larry are talking about the Atlantic Ocean, about me, about my poetry. And in *When The Sun Tries To Go On*, “the sky is very Ashbery tonight,” he’s turned into a quality. But I’m not really talking about the people who get up in the morning and feel bad. “The Circus [II]” is the first time I talk about my friends in that kind of realistic way. Though I did feel close to Elly the trapeze artist, the elephant man... Anyway, starting with that poem my poetry got more thoughtful and more attached to the ways things are perceived to be. There are several things I wrote around then. I remember a very prescient note I got

from Ted Berrigan that he loved “The Circus [II]” and that everything I wrote from then on would be influenced by it. Now whether this was like the fortuneteller in the movies (i.e. I let myself be influenced by the statement) or whether it was the influence of the events... The whole meditative part, Part II of *The Duplications* I wrote after “The Circus [II].” And then somewhat later than that after Janice and I broke up I started writing “The Art of Love” about which someone said to me I forget whom “You’re taking your separation pretty hard.” I worked on “The Art of Love” for three years on and off. Once I finished it, I had sort of figured out how to write this kind of poem very quickly. “Some General Instructions” I wrote in one afternoon. “The Art of Poetry” I wrote in one or two days. “On Beauty” I wrote in about a month. “The Problem of Anxiety” took about a week. These poems are truly autobiographical to some extent—not “The Art of Love,” but the others. When I wrote the poems in the book *The Art of Love*, it was the second or third time that I thought I had found a great original style that I could use forever—it turned out I could only use it for a few years. Those long lines that were so prosy and dry in a way that seemed to have enough music to keep them going in an interesting way.

The writing of the stories has almost nothing to do with anything I’ve been saying. It seems as though I had a lot of stuff that it would be fun to put into stories but I didn’t know how to write stories. I seemed to find out when I read Kawabata’s *Palm of the Hand* stories. All of the sudden I could write stories. Some of them I have that aren’t in the book, recognizably Kawabata-inspired stories. I can see how they led to the others.

Another odd thing about writing my stories. And I really don’t know how it... Borges told me that the way to become a short story writer was as follows. He had been a poet and he had been in a very bad automobile accident. He had hurt his skull and there was a very great possibility that there was damage to his brain. And he was afraid to write poems because he was afraid it would show there was damage. So he wrote out “Pierre Menard.” He sent it out as a piece of true literary criticism to the greatest magazine of Argentina, *Sur*. And he said, he printed it as criticism. He said, I hope Jorge now in heaven has forgiven me. And he wrote stories as criticism to prove he hadn’t lost his mind, and I thought about this. When I wrote stories was shortly after I had prostate cancer and had my prostate removed which made me afraid I had lost my manly powers (which I had not) and I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to write anymore that I wouldn’t be a strong writer since my inspiration for my work seemed to be sexual. I suppose it’s not unusual for writers to get erections when they write. I laugh when I write, I cry when I write, getting erections is the other thing the body does. I mean I didn’t get big ones. The only time I got big ones was when I wrote “A True Story,” my immortal poem about the tugboat. But I would often feel little flutterings of inspiration in that area that is supposed to be reserved for nighttime fun. I suppose it’s supposed to be an indication that that inspiration was a true one. And when I had my prostate out I was afraid I would lose that inspiration in more ways than fun as AW [?] would say. And without remembering what Borges had said I began to write stories. Hemingway’s story, “A Very Short Story,” was an influence but it certainly didn’t teach me how to write short stories. It’s so tough. The soldier, the nurse, his drinking, her betrayal, his getting the clap, it’s too tough. I loved the idea of the very short story.

Something else that gave me the idea. We lived in a big apartment above a drugstore, Blumenthal's. I've had a lot of dreams about this store. I used to go down and read magazines. It's where I read Spicy and Spicy Detective and Ballyhoo. Ballyhoo had lots of cartoons with college girls in their slips. And also there was a games digest. They had articles on how to win in poker, how to play three card monte or red devil. But there was a sex digest that was fantastic too where I learned that it wasn't the size of the penis but the intelligent use of it. I remember I read that sentence 8000 times because I was too young to have much of a thing going. The nudist magazines. The funniest thing I ever saw in a nudist magazine was a picture of a painter sitting on a stool wearing only a beret.

There was a magazine I subscribed to called Liberty. There was a prize every week for a story that was less than 100 words or that fit on a single page. I was fascinated by those stories. I don't suppose they were very good. They had all the flash of an adult world. They were dark doings in these stories, and sadnesses and joys I had no idea of. I sound like Allen Ginsberg. They had a weakness problem. They were influenced by O. Henry or Shakespeare's sonnets. They had tricky endings. If this be error and upon me proved / the only thing was for the last two weeks it hasn't snowed. That's a combination of Shakespeare and O. Henry. A hundred words or bust. I didn't see very many short stories for a long time after that. Then I read some short stories by Jayne Anne Philips in "Black Tickets." They're short stories as short as Kawabata's. I was excited by and rather envious of that, but these stories didn't speak to me, they weren't like my stories but I've always been grateful to her for writing them because they were the first proof after the Liberty that such things were possible. Lydia Davis's I hadn't read. They seemed unlike mine, they seemed intellectually tricky. "Making Auden's Bed" was very funny but smart in a way I didn't want my stories to be. I didn't want them to be intellectually bright. I was scared by it in a way because it seemed good in a way mine couldn't. It's silly to be upset by it because you can just take it. It's very likely that there will be a few writers who do something different. You shouldn't be upset, you should take it. And if they have any sense they'll take it right back in its new hybrid form.

When I was young I had no problem with other writers being good dazzling exciting but when I got to be a middle age writer I got bothered, I had no trouble stealing from people older than me but I had trouble with people my own age except for John, Frank, Jimmy; we were all turned on by each other, at least I was. Stanley Kunitz said, "Don't admit that; it's not good politics." I thought it was impure of Stanley to say this; he was doubtless right. It doesn't make people think as highly of you, it makes you seem like less of a total mystery genius, like John Ashbery, who denied there was a New York School. John in his interviews has been pretty good at creating the idea that there is a total mystery genius. That's another thing I'm sad about, another little harbor, that I'm not a total mystery genius. Of course that's like a sumo wrestler being unhappy that he's not a god. Is there a total mystery genius? I don't know. John's been very good at seeming like one. I don't think there's much deviltry in it, it's fallen on his shoulders out of the snow. He is the kind of person who can... Frank was certainly as much of a genius. But I've been sad. Stevens seems more like a mystery genius than anybody of that generation, purer, white man fallen from

their egotism, that everything had to be about their writing. He was very funny on this subject about Robert Lowell and Saul Bellow, and maybe when I wasn't around, about me. Lowell was an old friend. Bellow had a house up on the Hudson near where Fred lived. Gore Vidal also had a place up there. It was at Fred's house that I met Gore Vidal whom I liked but didn't see much at that time. My only friend who's at all like Fred is Frank Kermode, who has a similar charm. Of course they're completely different guys.

It's true that I haven't talked much or thought much about the men older than I who I have been close to or who meant much to me. Another is Stanley Kunitz, whom I met in Paris. Stanley liked my poetry. I was delighted by that. When we came back to New York we were friends for quite a while. We had many friendly disagreements about poetry. We would both agree on certain things that we liked, but I didn't expand my taste much to accommodate Stanley's taste. He was more generous and seemed to me to like more poets than he should, but I got a lot out of my friendship with Stanley. I did show him my poems as I was writing them. I showed him the poem *Thank You*, and I have a feeling he may have made some useful comments. His enthusiasm for my poems was most helpful, but he may have made some helpful comments. I felt protected. It seemed good to have someone ten or twenty years older than I who liked my work. Who else was there among the older fellers?

[break in transcript?]

How often do you do that?

I guess I don't. Andy Warhol does this stuff, Marcel Duchamp does. You take the Mona Lisa and you put it on a coffee mug. It's vulgar to make it seem like this means you're smarter than Leonardo, it's vulgar to make it seem like things were good then. What I like is to enjoy the Mona Lisa and enjoy the coffee cup. Sometimes these juxtapositions are funny as well as profound. Maybe what I really want to say is leaking out while I compose sentences. Hey that's pretty.

What do you mean? And what does that have to do with how you write.

Well I don't compose poems. I just write them. I don't know how to talk that way to you while you're typing what I say. Because I'm talking at an unusually slow pace. I don't compose I write. And I correct. I revise and revise and revise, to get smile from Jordan and check mark. Hey I like this one and sometimes plus! Little fuck thinks he knows more than Kenneth. I have a feeling there are many fresh fields we haven't even gotten near which you're afraid to ask me. What do you think people would want to know.

I know that you're always writing in different styles or genres. What are you hoping to find, or what are you avoiding?

You say that you think I write every poem differently, that I'm always changing genre, or style. It used to worry me. People said, some critic said that I didn't have a voice. Ron [Padgett] has a funny poem about that.⁴ But that stopped worrying me a long time ago. I think that I'll try to give you all kinds of reasons, some theoretical some personal.

I think in some way I'm trying to find the fountain of youth, like De Soto or Ponce de Leon. I'm trying to find some lost source of inspiration to give me some gushing, everything new. It's true, stories, plays, comics and these songs now, I want to find some place where I can do it all over again! I don't know whether I expect things to be better, I just love writing about them. Why haven't I stuck to the same style to enrich and deepen it. Wallace Stevens said he thought a poet could only get good by staying with the same style. I don't know. I don't seem to be able to stay with the same style or genre for more than a couple of years. I like starting over. I'm always looking for ways to write that will surprise me. I guess that whatever I have to say that's at all valuable I can only get to by being surprised, really surprised. It not only happens to me every time I change a style, it happens to me every time I write a poem. I don't have any idea what I'm going to say next and I don't want to. This means that I write a lot of stuff that, when I look at it later, I don't like. When you write this way you can confuse what excited you when you wrote it because surprising with what might delight other people. Some remark you make in conversation may delight you; it doesn't mean eight million people haven't thought of it before. It can be delusory. But I write a lot, and that seems to be the way I write.

New form: exciting because gives the feeling that one can always come on something new to say, not just a new way to say it, but something new to say. And that I think is an odd characteristic of art, and maybe a very true and maybe the most important insight of art, that a new way of saying something is saying something new and god knows what the human race can do with this information. Or to put it another way, is there a god who knows what we should do with this information.

How boring it would be without art, music and poetry! Everybody would be looking at the fucking OJ Simpson trial which they almost all are anyway. As many people as you can get to participate at any one time, fine. But poetry, in a sense, it's like some religion that only some people really know about and you're passing this torch and keeping it alive. It's completely democratic and anybody can get the torch and keep the light of it. You don't have to be rich, you don't have to be white, you don't have to be born into the cult. It's a very democratic kind of aristocratic thing. Paul Valéry said it's not true as people say so often that not many people are interested in poetry. A lot of people are interested in poetry and like poetry. What is true is that there are very few people for whom poetry is a necessity. The ones for whom it's a necessity are the ones you have to pass the torch to. Without them if you pass the torch to the ones who just like poetry and don't need it, it would be sort of like leaving the food supply to people who just like it but don't need it.

⁴ Padgett, Ron, *Collected Poems*, "Voice" (167)

[break in transcript?] [see passage on comic/ritual]

In a good poem you have to use everything you can to turn things upside down and recreate them. The comic is one of those things. This kind of recreation is not what people want in a ritual. One reason that being comic is necessary or useful in this endeavor is that there is already so much poetry written on every subject which is either from the beginning pompous and false or has come to seem somewhat so by repetition and variation on it by not very good poets, so that one doesn't come into the ring, one doesn't come up to the typewriter, to one's desk in this abstract space. One comes up to one's desk surrounded by and haunted by the poetry of the past. What you want to do with the poetry of the past, is to use what's good about it to do something quick. Just by using words like "With beaded bubbles winking at the brim" or "Beauty is truth" you can get sort of the whole atmosphere of Keats's poem and his whole way of thinking. On the other hand, if you stay with "Beaded bubbles winking at the brim" or "Beauty is truth and truth beauty, yeah just read the Newark Herald and you'll see where beauty is." That's naive. It's to juxtapose beauty with something as delicious. What you want to do is use what's good in those lines and at the same time make them part of what you're saying yourself. Maybe the way the early Christians used Greek columns in Saint Isiphae, put them in their churches. These Greek columns were recognizable as Greek columns; the intention was completely different, but they still had their Greek or roman dignity and meaning about them.

[break in transcript] [passage on what a poem needs to feel finished?]

Before I think a poem of mine is finished it has to seem good to me the day after I write it, the week, the month, probably a couple of months. I'm not really sure because when I—it's like when you do a translation. When you first do a translation the words you use in English, say you're translating from the French, the words are still so impregnated with the French, *soir* and evening are the same, you sort of have to take yourself by surprise and see if it's any good. See if evening is good. If I write the name Emma and the word *brook* these may seem very moving to me because I may have liked somebody named Emma and we were walking by a brook. I have to take myself by surprise and see if I have a feeling quite apart from the feeling I had when I wrote it.

[break in transcript?]

Is it recorded there that I think Henry Green's novel *Living* is a great book? And so is *Partygoing* and so is *Concluding*. I just wanted to get down, that I think he's a marvelous writer.

What makes you think of him ahead of Ford, Firbank or Forster?

That I've gotten to like him more recently. I was just thinking about how radical and peculiar the prose is in *Living*. No, I don't think it's a better book than the best of Ford or Forster. Firbank is a

special case. He's very very good. All of it is in ebullience of the sentences in Firbank. It's very hard for me to feel the tug of the story in Firbank.

[break in transcript?] [section on drive to be clear]

One way to make something clear. You get so embroiled with other concepts that are known, the usual concepts that are known, I could say about this woods what it is about their toothpicky, misty, almost legible excitingness interests me, I could say, "This beginning of spring is really the beginning of a new winter." That would be an odd statement; the terms I'm using are familiar for time moves on and spring itself brings more thoughts of winter than winter does because our desire in winter is quiescent, whereas when spring begins, just the first sight of it, our desire awakens and we are distressed by what we see remaining of winter. This may be difficult but it is by no means obscure. You have to be smart and willing to go along with this way of thinking about emotions. However that is a way to be clear that I haven't chosen. Mainly because what I've just said doesn't seem to be true. I think I like to look at changing things like that landscape of trees as if they weren't changing. That's what I'm doing in my songs and that's what I did in my short stories.

[break in transcript] [section on short poems]

I guess one reason I like to put together short poems is because that is a way of elaborating the very quality of elusiveness of the individual parts. That's true of "In Bed," it's true of the "Songs [from the Plays]." If you're doing a painting and you just put a red spot on it, that's heroic I guess. If you keep on putting spots of different colors, white orange violet green, eventually it will either look like notes on a page, objects in a room seen by a myopic person, a crowd on a beach seen from the air... It might not exactly look like that but it will have something in that that has enough of that movement or suggestion to cause you to have a feeling so you can respond to the individual parts. Once you do that, if you're a painter you can do nine more of them. One that's all in shades of blue, one in yellows and whites, one in yellows and blues, one in blacks and whites. The variety will make them more exciting. Then the black and white one will be very interesting in relation to all that.

It's tricky this trying to suggest meanings without coming right out and stating them. The trouble with coming right out and stating them is they vanish. Some of them do. I mean you grab a little bird and you have that soft fluffy feeling in your hand. This light throbbing little thing. You start explaining the bird, you pull the wings apart (you don't tear them off) but you lose the way it feels in your hand. It's a minor thing but it might be terribly important. In almost no serious description of a bird is the feeling of what it's like in your hand or the feeling when you're a child of trying to catch the bird. And what if trying to catch the bird doesn't have any connection to finding someone you love or making something with your life. Supposing you just want the feeling of having a bird in your hand.

Ending poems.

Ending poems. John said to me at Harvard that a difference between our poems was that I try to end mine with a big bang and he tried to sneak away unnoticed. I don't think either of us does that anymore. Paul Valéry said as everybody knows "A work of art is never finished, it's abandoned." There's an advantage to being a painter, because a gallery dealer comes and takes it away, or the person who buys it takes it away, and then it's finished. I try not to work on my poems after they've been in a book. When I can read it over many times and feel good about it.

[break in transcript]

I always find that I venture out into the real world so called it's very helpful for my work. I'm afraid it'll take too much of my time and I won't be able to write. And I take very good care of myself, I never take too long.

Teaching children was very inspiring to me. The peace movement in 1968 was inspiring. Getting outside of myself to be very involved with a woman is inspiring. But on the other hand I don't like to spend too much time outside the head, the typewriter, you have to find a balance. Stendhal said that his dream was to write all day and find stimulating company at night. He was in Ceveda Vecchia near Rome, he was a consul and there wasn't much stimulating conversation there.

What's the main thing?

The main thing is to use yourself as well as you can. And the purpose of a good educational system is to teach people how to use themselves well. This involves teaching them what they have in them to use. Poetry is a part of this educational system and an example of good use of oneself. Poetry uses ones intellect, one's emotions, one's sensations, even one's sexual feelings, one's sense of time, it gets them all at once into an utterance. But to just write poetry and not to love somebody, not to have friends, not to help other people, not to see the world, not to use your body in all kinds of ways would be, might be a life that would do good for other people because your work would be there. I don't think you could say 'so and so is doing the main thing.' That's what a person should be doing. Pleasure I agree with Aristotle about. It's not an end in itself but an accompaniment of doing things that are good. Pleasure as an end in itself as when taking drugs or jerking off all day—you don't end up with any equity. It's like you're renting, you're paying this rent on life instead of working to own some of it. If you look back at twenty years or five weeks of taking cocaine and jerking off, what do you have? Nothing. I could put all this in a different way. What did you do this summer? I was stoned all the time and I jerked off 5,000 times.

Another view of the main thing. I read maybe G. Wilson Knight on Lear or somebody on Lear. The great theme of this play is the purpose of life is the creation of great souls. Some variation of that is a rather inspiring way to think about life. Every once in a while you meet someone you can't believe it, they're so good, so noble, so strong, so generous, they have so much love for other people, they've created such wonderful things—if somebody has a couple of these quali-

ties, you think, “Yeah, I get it.” It brings tears to my eyes to think of people like that. To be like that seems to be better than anything. Suppose you could be that person but you never could have written any poems. You get attached to the person you are. “Yeah, I’ll give up America and go be a Spaniard.” That’s all stuff that’s already happened. Nowadays we think it happens because of the ways ones parents treat one, even accidental things in one’s childhood. A lot of it. That’s—I don’t know.

What do you think this means? [hands rejection slip with "Sorry to disappoint and thanks" written underneath.]

It seems to me an attempt to be minimally civil while showing how smart they are by not finishing the phrase—or how pressed for time—right, that’s a good one. It’s an attempt to show how cool they are. But anyway if somebody wrote out “we are sorry to disappoint you by not taking your poems” it would be clear to them that that was a condescending thing to say. It’s clear that’s condescending. What the fuck are you doing talking about my poems, it’s irritating. Sorry to upset you by not taking your poems. Are you assuming I’m disappointed? It’s enjoying the power they have over you. It’s ugly. They used to write to me, “Sorry, the vote went against these,” as if it was women’s suffrage. Or, “Sorry, this is not for us.” Which reminds me of people who say, you go in to an enormous restaurant and you say, “I’d like the shrimp cocktail,” and the waiter says, “I don’t have any shrimp today but I have some very nice crab cocktail.” What do you mean, “I”? It’s a false personalizing of a more cut-and-dried abstract issue. If they don’t like a poem I think the more polite thing to say is “We regret not being able to use this material,” or “Sorry,” or “Try us again.”

I refer you to Ron's poem about warm regards. He gets a letter from somebody and at the end

[break in transcript]

Is that from Some General Instructions also?

Yeah. Guy Béart was a young musician and composer and singer whose career was just starting in France when I met him there through my friend Jean-Claude Vigne, my first french friend. Guy B art was interested in having someone translate his songs into English. There was also a very pretty woman involved, Claude Sylvain, she had appeared in a film called *Du Rififi chez les hommes*. Her appearance in this movie was quite startling, she was quite beautiful as I remember, half-Russian, half-Italian, this was the 1950s. She appeared naked in a bathtub, thrilling the entire cinematic world. Anyway Claude Sylvain wanted to meet Guy Béart and I think I met Guy Béart just a few minutes before Claude Sylvain did—I had something to do with getting them together. There were any number of things I would have done to get close to Claude Sylvain, this totally unavailable French movie star. Claude wanted to get close to me, not only to get close to Guy, but because she thought I might write songs for her. So I did start writing some arty songs, which she didn’t think would go over in her cabaret act. She sang some songs like “Mon rat mon

rat... Anyway, my friendship with Guy Béart stuck. Which goes to show, as Delmore Schwartz said, “Sex is the beginning of many things and the end of none.” I started translating the songs of Guy Béart because he wanted to be famous in America as everyone else did. I went to the French equivalent of ASCAP because for these songs to be performed I had to be a member. I had to pass some tests—I hadn’t published. They played a tune for me and gave me a topic and asked me to make up some words in French. Somehow I was on that day and was able to write a pretty good song lyric in French—this was all I had to do. Easier than the Prix de Rome. Though I would have loved to compete for a poetry prize like that—that’s my forte.

[break in transcript]

Commander Papend seems to me one of the number of rather obsessed super-powered Marlovian characters in my work.

Like Bertha?