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Featured Poets

Noah Eli Gordon; Marge Piercy; Reginald Shepard

from [*Poet's Bookshelf II: Contemporary Poets on Books That Shaped Their Art*](#)

In this issue, the *DMQ Review* is proud to present the debut of editor Peter Davis' forthcoming volume, *Poet's Bookshelf II: Contemporary Poets on Books That Shaped Their Art*, to be released from Barnwood Press, January 2008. In celebration we offer three poets' perspectives on books essential to their own writing. As in the original *Poet's Bookshelf*, a variety of poets offer insights to their writing processes through listing their ten most influential books, adding whatever comments they choose. Some are terse, some in-depth. These selections offer readers and writers alike a compelling and diverse selection of recommended books to add to their own bookshelves.

From *Poet's Bookshelf II*, we're proud to present the thoughts of poets Noah Eli Gordon, Marge Piercy, and Reginald Shepherd. Their bios appear below.

Noah Eli Gordon

Early Essentials:

Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*

Theodore Roethke, *Collected Poems*

Charles Simic (every book up to and including *Walking the Black Cat*)

Michael Palmer, *First Figure*

Ann Lauterbach, *And For Example*

John Ashbery, *Three Poems*

Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*

Later Essentials:

Lisa Jarnot, *Ring of Fire*

Philip Whalen, *Scenes of Life at the Capitol*

Alice Notley, *Disobedience*

Albert Mobilio, *The Geographics*

Clark Coolidge, *The Crystal Text*

Clark Coolidge, *Mine: The One that Enters the Stories*

John Godfrey, *Push the Mule*

Rosmarie Waldrop, *The Reproduction of Profiles*

Stephen Rodefer, *Four Lectures*

Michael Friedman, *Species*

David Shapiro (every book from *Lateness* to *A Burning Interior*)

In writing these notes, I realized that these books are not so much essentials as they are signposts, works that have lead me in various directions; that I was made aware of these directions is what I consider to be essential, but only in so far as their existence allowed me to stumble onto my own particular course, for, “the signpost,” as Henri Michaux writes, “stays in its role by never taking the road itself.”

I came to poetry in my early twenties, as an undergrad. *The Collected Poems* of Wallace

Stevens was the first book of poetry I bought on my own. Along with a dictionary, I'd bring the Stevens to a café, sit for hours reading, copying the definition of every word I didn't know into my notebook. Although I started with Stevens and I'll never leave him, I've yet to thoroughly read all of it; chunks in much of the later work remain only cursorily examined. I think this is because I continually return to specific poems, several of which I've read hundreds of times. Stevens is just so absolutely stunning with his rhetorical loopings and kaleidoscopic syntax. The only experience I've had that feels analogous to reading Stevens was that of cutting a huge beetle in half and expecting to see some sort of amorphous ooze trail from its abdomen, but being wholly surprised when dozens of pristinely white eggs spilled out, and the thing just kept walking. I suppose what I'm getting at is the way Stevens cracks open the art of argumentation and leaves behind a thinking space pregnant with numerous possibilities. Unlike many of my early influences, his work remains vital to me.

Roethke was the first poet that I read with an exhaustive intentionality—every word he'd written, everything written about him, dozens of books. Methodically, I moved through his *Collected Poems*, rereading it in its entirety each time I finished. What drew me to him was the shock of immediate affinity I felt for the bristling ambition and bloated anxiety that is everywhere present in his writing. Roethke is always worried that, as a writer, he is not good enough, and traces of this worry are embedded within the poems, giving them a vulnerability that tempers the more authoritative moments. There was also something in the playfulness that attracted me. He was fun to read. I still have many of his lines imprinted in my psyche. It's been almost ten years since I've read him deeply, and I'm sure I wouldn't be as impressed or interested, but he was extremely foundational, and perhaps part to blame for my own obsessively ambitious and unfortunately anxious engagement with poetry.

Charles Simic was the second poet in whom I completely immersed myself. I'd first encountered his work in an anthology that one of my undergrad professors had assigned. Although we'd skipped discussing his poems, I was nonetheless enamored. Whereas Stevens was for me at the time a powerhouse of diction and syntax, and even Roethke seemed somehow remote, Simic made it look easy, made it look like anyone could write a poem. Ah, such are the deceptive signs of mastery. I have tucked away in my archives an entire manuscript of poems that are poor imitations of Simic. To this day, even after completing a graduate degree and publishing nearly one hundred reviews, the single longest piece of critical writing I've done is an

undergrad paper on the shifting imagery in his work. It's not a particularly good paper, but I think it is a testament to his importance to my own development. I don't really read him anymore, and whatever effect he had on my early work—which, at 32, I hope I'm still writing—is probably not all that apparent. Perhaps what I learned from Simic has more to do with allowances, with the way one might simply do what one wants without regard for prescriptive trends or already canonized models.

The next two books to have a marked impact on me were the result of a kind of happy accident or maybe a prophetic stumbling. As a college graduation present, my mother gave me a gift certificate to a local used bookstore. I was still pretty green as far as what was out there in poetry land, so I went in and pulled off the shelf anything that looked somewhat interesting, much of it work I would never bother with now. There were two books among the many that I'd gotten which changed me in a huge way. Michael Palmer's *First Figure* and Ann Lauterbach's *And For Example*. Every other book I purchased that day had an exhaustive element to it, a way of unfolding that never really redeemed itself, or that could never be refolded. They were to me like that snake-in-a-jar trick, only I could never get the snake back in. What I'm trying to say is that the work was just so entirely on the surface that there was no pay back in returning to the books after one had thoroughly absorbed them. The Palmer and Lauterbach were different. At first I was pretty turned off—their poetry just didn't make sense. Well, it didn't make what I then understood to be sense (the irony here is that I often spend a considerable time explaining to my own students the nuances of what constitutes both sense and meaning). I even went so far as to sell the Lauterbach book back to the used book store, only to buy it again a few weeks later, once I realized that it, like the collected Stevens I owned, was in some way calling to me. When I started to ease my expectations with the Palmer and Lauterbach books, I came to see that not only were they infinitely more compelling than the work I was starting to become pretty familiar with, but they also were more respectful of my intelligence as a reader. Although they asked more of me, they paid off in numerous ways.

John Ashbery's *Three Poems* had the next major influence on me. The first time I read the book I was so absolutely frustrated that after several hours of attempting to follow the progression of the pronouns—and failing miserably—I threw it in anger against the wall. Now, years later, it is one of my favorite books. I recently heard a recording of a reading of *Three Poems* that Ashbery had done before the work was published. He mentions how he's going to

read a long poem that might take an hour or two, then after realizing that he's forgotten the last page, mentions how it doesn't really matter, as the poem is, "an environmental work." I love this as a description, and think it's not only accurate but also extremely useful. In a lot of ways the book is about nothing, which is to say it values the movement of the language, the digressive runs and metaphors so extended that they dissolve into something wholly different, over whatever vehicle one uses to get wherever one is going. I think this is the first book I ever read that functions in a way similar to music without being musical; it has the same formal concerns and architectural construction. The most valuable thing I've learned from *Three Poems* is that through what might initially seem an irrelevancy regarding subject matter, one is able to work with the loftiest of subjects. Just as it's easy to say that this book is about nothing, it's also easy, and equally true, to say that it is about everything, including its own aboutness. The book enlarged my willingness to read in different ways, with different expectations. While I was writing *Novel Pictorial Noise*, which Ashbery went on to select for the National Poetry Series, I was rereading *Three Poems*. I'd had no idea that he was going to be a judge for the prize, but I'm forever thankful for the marvelous coincidence.

I think the next major influence on me was *The Book of Questions* by Edmond Jabès. In an interview, Jabès recounts a meeting with Max Jacob where Jacob, after seeing a manuscript of Jabès' poems that seemed imitative of his own, throws it in the trash and says something along the lines of, "now we can talk." The anecdote is illustrative of the struggle Jabès went through to find a way he might proceed on his own, a struggle that I was going through at the same time I'd discovered his work. Jabès' use of aphorisms, faux Rabbinical commentary and the ghost of a narrative revolving around two lovers, created something entirely new and endlessly engrossing. I see *The Book of Questions* as a sort of model for what I'd like to attain, a solid foundation allowing for one's continued work. Since reading Jabès, I've been writing in a more systemic mode, writing with larger projects in mind.

At this point, which would be about 8 or 9 years ago, the books on my list had less of a holistic essentialness about them; instead, I learned very specific and tactile things from each: sonic play from Jarnot; the importance of the incidental from Whalen; how to construct a character to counter the self from Notley; the balance of the abstract and the surreal from Mobilio; ways to work past the referential through musicality from Coolidge; how to be simultaneously tough and tender and drop the word that from Godfrey; how to use the sentence

and philosophic inquiry from Waldrop; parataxis parataxis parataxis from Rodefer and Friedman; and finally I think I am always reading and learning from David Shapiro. Perhaps this is a symptom of being a younger poet, but I prefer David Shapiro over Wallace Stevens. Shapiro's books are the most essential to me.

Marge Piercy

Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Emily Dickinson, *Collected Poems*

Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*

William Carlos Williams

Muriel Rukyser

Pablo Neruda

Guillaume Apollinaire

William Wordsworth, "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*

Wisława Szymborska

Nelly Sachs

I would list Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* together, because they had similar effects on me, even though I began to read Walt Whitman when I was a sophomore in high school, and Allen Ginsberg when I was a graduate student.

When I read Whitman, I did not so much produce wan imitations but my first real poems. It was like what happened many years later when I was working as a secretary in Chicago and went to hear Allen Ginsberg. It wasn't that I began to imitate Ginsberg or that I began in high school to produce little pastiches of Whitman. Rather each of them seemed to say to me by their practice, if you write out of who you really are, if you deal genuinely with your own experiences, if you go into yourself honestly, you can write something worth reading.

Whitman gave me a way to try to grapple with an early mystical experience, which nothing in my family or my background prepared me for. Whitman's long flowing line and American

idiom was so different from the other poets I had read, and his exuberance matched my own overabundant energy. His sense of being rooted in his own body and this landscape liberated me to deal with my feelings and my experiences.

I link the influence that hearing Ginsberg had on me in 1959 with reading Whitman in 1951 or so, because the sense I derived from both was that to write authentically out of your experience, no matter how outside the mainstream society seemed to regard you, was inherently valuable if you wrote well. Whitman offered support for the strange notion that what happened to me could interest other people. I could immediately tell the difference between what I began writing, crude, often inchoate but clanging with Detroit and Michigan sounds, sights, smells, lives, and the Pepto Bismol that I had dribbled out before that time.

I found in Whitman and then in Ginsberg a confirmation of earlier rhythms from Jewish liturgy and the Torah and the Psalms, rhythms that were not those of most poetry I had been taught in school, but rhythms that came naturally to me. Later I would learn many other line lengths and work steadfastly on what I wanted to do with line length and line breaks and sound qualities, but early in my apprenticeship, Whitman directed my attention to the oral power of poetry. His poetry was written as a notation for reciting it, I felt. He made use of many devices familiar to me from liturgy, used them for creating structure, expectation. His devices were useful to me and I studied them.

But beyond training in incremental repetition and anaphora, what I derived from Whitman was permission to be where and who I was: to be American, to have a body loud and demanding, to feel politically, to think that my life, my place and time were worthy of poetry.

I always say that we American poets are all children of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, that they blasted the road for us and we are still exploring the ramifications of what they opened up. Both were stone originals and thoroughly American, thoroughly of their landscapes and their own queer strong voices. I could not have found two better mentors for the beginning of my study of poetry, and I read both of them frequently to this day—still aloud and with respect and affection that have not eroded but grown.

From Emily Dickinson, I learned the value of compression and again, the value of what you know as a poet, your own experience as opposed to what other poets have written about and what you are expected to write poems about (paintings you have seen; your travels on Guggenheims; poems born of other poems). Her keen and exact and unsentimental confrontations with the

natural world excited me. She had such a clear eye and such a good ear.

In William Carlos Williams I found the urban landscape of my own upbringing. I found an exact respect for the things and people encountered. I found again an American idiom that reflected a careful study and respect for what he met and what he knew and what he experienced and what he heard, day in and day out. There is also a wit that let me see that I could use my own without compromising the seriousness of my intent. I also found that in Ginsberg. From my own Jewish culture, I was used to the mixture of the tragic and the humorous.

Muriel Rukeyser gave me the freedom to deal with the experiences of a modern fully sexual woman without that weakening and sickening coyness I had encountered. I began reading her when I was a senior in high school. I have never stopped. I had the great pleasure of meeting her and reading with her in New York. I tried to tell her how much she had meant to me. I wasn't exaggerating. I also learned a great deal of prosody from her. I learned you could write political poems that were fine poetry and extremely powerful and that to do so, you had to use all the resources of language and rhythm available to you. She was one of the poets who taught me how important the oral qualities of the poem are, how the poem performs. She was a woman poet who never concealed or apologized for her female experiences and never, never pretended to be a man or put on male clothing to be heard. She was an intelligent poet and one of great political integrity and empathy.

Reading Neruda, sometimes in Spanish and sometimes in translation and once spending a month trying to translate him for my own use was immersion in another great soul. I love his Odes particularly. Like Williams, he had the precise eye and passion for the everyday, for the things around him, but he transformed them, he transmuted them. Passion is caught in his poetry and loosed when you read it. Again, a very political poet and one of immense love and energy. His imagery astounds me. All these poets gave me permission to express my politics and my experiences in my poems, at a time when political poetry is looked down upon and when critics try to lock it in a ghetto of inferior genre. Neruda encouraged me to loose my imagination, as for that matter did Apollinaire, whom I read intensively in my twenties.

Wordsworth meant more to me in the "Preface" to *The Lyrical Ballads* than in the actual poems, although I certainly studied them hard and long for my own education. It is his insistence on poetry coming from and using the language of everyday life, of making the poem clear that inspired me then and still. "Accessible" is a damnation often now; an accessible poet is somehow

less of a poet. But I don't believe that. I work hard and revise again and again to make my poems clearer.

Wisława Szymborska has been important to me because she reminded me that a poem can appear to be very simple and be very powerful. A poet does not need rich imagery to create a strong poem. I forget that sometimes, and she reminds me.

And finally I would like to mention Nelly Sachs, who taught me there is nothing that cannot be written about in poetry, in spite of what some critics say. No experience is too dreadful, too painful, too immense to create poetry out of, and in fact as poets, it may be our duty to confront such desperate subjects as well as we can. The last two poets I have read in translation, but they have been just as important to me as if I could read the languages in which they created.

Reginald Shepherd

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems*

Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*

Hart Crane, *White Buildings*

Louise Bogan, *The Blue Estuaries*

James Wright, *Collected Poems*

Marilyn Hacker, *Presentation Piece*

W. H. Auden, *The English Auden*

Louise Glück, *Descending Figure*

Jean Valentine, *The Messenger*

Laura Mullen, *The Surface*

Jorie Graham, *The End of Beauty*

I won't attempt in this little essay to list even a fraction of my favorite books, either past or current, but instead will discuss some of the books that have played the greatest role in my formation as a writer, roughly in the order in which I encountered them. Some of my favorite

poets, like Yeats, William Carlos Williams, and Marianne Moore, have not been strong influences on my work. Some of the writers who most shaped me, like James Wright, are not people I much read anymore. (Some of my strong early influences are things I hesitate to admit having ever read, like the poetry of Erica Jong and Alice Walker, though I'm curious what I would think of Jong's poetry today). There have been many writers since those formative days who have been important influences, like Michael Palmer, Ann Lauterbach, Paul Celan, and Osip Mandelstam, but I came to them as a mature writer, which engenders a different kind of encounter. I doubt that I'll ever again be under the spell of a writer in the way that I was enthralled by these early loves.

I've probably written too many times about the impact that Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" had on me. It was the first poem I ever read, and it made me want to write poetry, made me want to be a poet (these aren't the same thing). Eliot had taken my mundane misery and made it shapely, meaningful, beautiful, even. I wanted to be able to do that for myself, and to create things that would have the effect on others that poem had on me. I read all of Eliot soon after (I bought *The Waste Land and Other Poems* in the Walden Books at the Macon Mall). I didn't understand all of it, but I experienced it, a hollow man traveling through Eliot's wasteland as if it were my own. But I quickly discovered that while I could admire Eliot, I couldn't emulate him, not without sounding like a parody of him.

In Wallace Stevens' chilly, distanced intimacies and sinuous, carefully measured sentences, in his intermingling of intellect and emotion finding form, I found a mode that I could emulate, a model for the kind of poems I wanted to write. No matter how intense the emotional pressure, his lines never lost their poise: I aspired to that composure, to compose that way. Stevens' embodiment of idea and feeling in images and landscapes like those of "The Snow Man" and "The Auroras of Autumn" is an ideal toward which I still aim.

The psychological landscapes of Auden's early poetry entranced me, the loneliness and desire embodied in its craggy limestone wastes, desolate cityscapes, and cryptic vignettes of mysterious wars in which opposing soldiers steal moments of intimacy during lulls in the fighting. Edward Mendelson describes them very well: "These first poems often have the air of gnomic fragments; they seem to be elements of some...private myth whose individual details never quite resolve themselves into a unified narrative... The elusiveness and indecipherability of the early poems are part of their meaning; they enact the isolation they describe." The poems'

overtly homosexual undertones (the paradoxical formulation is intentional) seduced me as well. Love was a secret agent operating in the shadows and interstices, always in danger of being exposed and betrayed.

Hart Crane's extravagances of language and vision also enthralled me: he wrote poems that were unabashedly Poetry, utterly unlike everyday speech. His poems' passion thrilled me, all the more so because it was the passion of a man for other men. That Crane sought transcendence in the flesh of other men made sense: other people seemed both to inhabit and to own their bodies, while I always felt a stranger to mine. The oceanic rush of Crane's words transfigured emotions into "The silken skilled transmemberment of song," proposing voyages I longed to embark upon, by means of which I could transcend my feelings without surrendering them, and end up in the arms of some beloved. Perhaps I could even conjure him up out of the luxuriance of my words.

Louise Bogan showed me the possibilities of a bitter lyricism like that of Sir Thomas Wyatt, disenchanted and yet enchanting in its lithe and lute-like music: "Loneliness was the heart within your side." Her commitment to what she called the stripped, still lyric was a model and a reproach to my tendency to talk in poems; poems were "to be sung on the water." Her poems were all songs for the last act, immortalizing the moment after passion, the eyes opening to a world of wonders now shown to be false or at best lost: "Now that I have your heart by heart, I see." That too felt true to me, who had never known passion at all but could only imagine it as out of reach.

James Wright's deep image epiphanies, a man lying in a hammock surrounded by the flourishing natural world that reminds one of one's own insignificance to the point that one realizes the waste of one's life, floating among lonely animals, longing in fear and hope and hopelessness for the red spider who is God, showed me (along with my readings in Imagist poetry, H. D. in particular) the power and intensity of brevity and concision, the way moments can open up into exhilaration or desolation, the everyday can blossom into revelation: "My bones turn to dark emeralds."

Louise Glück's spare, lapidary poems contained so much passion in their restraint; they created a mythic world where pain was raised to a higher, nobler level, mere suffering transfigured into grief. The poems in *Descending Figure* seemed almost chiseled out of the suffocating, intractable mass of silence. To have been able to wrest them out of the void was a victory in itself. Their aspiration toward an impossible perfection, a finality of utterance as if

one's words could transubstantiate themselves into the Word, inspired and humbled me: "it is the same need to perfect, / of which death is the mere byproduct."

Marilyn Hacker's work demonstrated the way that formal poise and stylistic elegance could be combined with direct engagement with the materials of everyday life and with a range of diction from graffiti to sophisticated literary allusion. Her poetry affirmed that it was okay to write what a friend called flashy poems, poems that were unashamedly poetry and not just lineated anecdotes. Her work also confirmed that poems should be heard and not just seen. Under her influence I wrote exclusively in form for about a year (my sophomore year in college), and my ear is the better for it.

Jean Valentine's poems exuded a cool but impassioned sense of mystery, and revealed how much could be said by so much left out. Her poems absorbed their occasions into themselves, leaving behind the luminous residue of event, these numinous tokens left behind, ordinary things illuminated by a scrupulously loving attention: "and trees paths stars this earth / how will I think of them."

The infatuated yet skeptical music of Laura Mullen's poems sang itself to me for years. They embodied an almost perfect and perfectly precarious balance between what critic Charles Altieri calls lyricism and lucidity, enchantment and disenchantment: beauty and pathos and the awareness of all the things they won't let you say. I, who longed for the raptures of romance but knew already that romance couldn't always be trusted, aspired to walk that fine line, staying "Up all night for beauty you could use."

Jorie Graham's work, like Stevens', made ideas shapely, and sensuous, and made the numinous bloom out of daily landscapes. Like Stevens, she demonstrated that one not only could but must think in poems, and to let the poem think. Thought in her poems was not conclusions but process, the flight of geese overhead a syntax to be parsed and explicated. Her exploration and excavation of myth and cultural narrative in *The End of Beauty* resonated with my desire to get inside and under myths, to find out what lay hidden on their underside, the other side of myth.

Noah Eli Gordon was born in Cleveland in 1975. His books include *A Fiddle Pulled From the Throat of a Sparrow* (2007) which won the Green Rose Prize, *Novel Pictorial Noise* (2006) which was selected by John Ashbery for the 2006 National Poetry Series, and *The Area of Sound Called the Subtone* (2004) which received the Sawtooth Prize. His reviews and essays have appeared in dozens of journals, including *Boston Review*, *the Poker*, *26*, *Jacket*, and the *St. Marks Poetry Project Newsletter*. He writes a chapbook review column for *Rain Taxi: Review of Books*, teaches creative writing at the University of Colorado at Denver, and publishes the Braincase chapbook series.

Marge Piercy was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1936. When she won a scholarship to the University of Michigan she became the first member of her family to attend college. She has published fifteen books of poetry, including *Colors Passing Through Us* (2003), *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish Theme* (1999), and *Early Grrrl: The Early Poems of Marge Piercy* (1999). Recent among fifteen novels are *Three Women* (1999), *Storm Tide*, with Ira Wood (1998), and *City of Darkness, City of Light* (1996). She edited the poetry anthology *Early Ripening: American Women Poets Now* (1988) and is currently the poetry editor of *Tikkun*.

Reginald Shepherd was born in 1963 in New York City and raised in tenements and housing projects in the Bronx. His recent books of poems include *Fata Morgana* (2007), *Otherhood* (2003), and *Wrong* (1999). He edited *The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries* (2004). His many awards include the 1993 Discovery/The Nation award, the 1994 George Kent Prize from *Poetry* magazine, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. He lives with his partner in Pensacola, Florida.

