

STARTING IN SONG

John Hollander

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The earliest song I remember being sung to me by my mother, to put me to sleep, was the Yale fight song “Boola Boola.” My parents had moved to New Haven just a year after they were married and a few years before I was born. My mother, who had recently completed a master’s in comparative literature at Columbia, lectured occasionally and guest-taught elsewhere in Connecticut. My father was what in the early 1920s was still called a physical organic chemist—that is, he did physical chemistry, but was now an organic chemist. He had gotten a National Research Council Fellowship to learn physiology at the Yale Medical School. Eventually, my parents returned to New York City, where she taught high school English and my father became head of the gastroenterology research laboratory at Mount Sinai Hospital and taught on the graduate faculty at Columbia.

I grew up in New York and New Haven was one of the first “other” places, apart from Brooklyn, that I knew of. (Another was Cold Spring Harbor, New York, where I was told I spent the summer when I was probably one or two.) I mention “Boola Boola” because I think the songs I heard up through the first decade of my life were about as important as anything else in determining my sense of literary language in general, and poetic language in particular. There were a lot of songs, from both my parents. My father was a great explainer, my mother a great author of one-liners, and they often collaborated in music. My mother liked to sing, in a pleasant untrained voice, while my father played the piano. One of my first memories is of hearing my mother sing Schubert lieder. I was told what the songs were about, and by the time I could read, I could get the often hilariously bad English translations fitted in under the German in the piano-vocal score.

John Hollander, poet and critic, was born in New York City, attended the Bronx High School of Science, and received his B.A. and M.A. from Columbia University. After a term at the Society of Fellows at Harvard, he completed his Ph.D. at Indiana University and thereupon taught at Yale, with a hiatus at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His interests were in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poetry; nineteenth-century American poetry; poetics; art and literature; the writing of verse; Spenser; Milton; rhetoric; and twentieth-century poetry. At Yale he also taught the writing of verse, as well as the professional and unprofessional reading and interpretation of it. In his teaching and critical writing, he has explored both literal and figurative relations between art and literature and between music and poetry. Most recent among his eighteen books of poetry are *A Draft of Light* (2008), *Figurehead* (1999), *Selected Poetry* (1993), and a reissue of his earlier *Reflections on Espionage* (2000). His critical books include *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry, 1500-1700* (1961), *Vision and Resonance* (1975), *The Figure of Echo* (1981), *Rhyme’s Reason* (1981), *Melodious Guile* (1988), *The Gazer’s Spirit* (1995), and *The Work of Poetry* (1997). Among the twenty books he has edited are the Library of America’s two-volume *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*; poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1990), Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* (1992), and (with Sir Frank Kermode) *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* (1972).

One book that was terribly important for me was an anthology called *Chansons de France*, published in 1899 and illustrated by Bouté de Monvel. It consisted of songs for children that originated in the eighteenth century and even earlier. Like a lot of other things for children in Europe and America, they were really adult material. I heard them all, with the French laughingly translated by my father, who would roar out the words “Mon père m’a donné un mari, Mon Dieu! Quel homm’, quel petit homme,” and so on. Very, very early, I was also introduced to a book of J. Rosamond Johnson’s musical settings, or arrangements, of Negro spirituals, with James Weldon Johnson’s notes.

There was a whole raft of things like this, and by the time I got to school and could start to puzzle out what originally I had accepted with simple wonder, I had begun to develop an interest in the way words and music fitted together. When we first learned “America the Beautiful” in the fourth or fifth grade, I remember coming to that wonderful final stanza,

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine Alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears.

Although I hardly knew enough about grammar to understand what I was doing, I was perplexed because I construed “sees” in the intransitive sense of “envisions”: that is, the patriot’s dream sees, prophetically, beyond the years. What followed it was such a clear break in the musical setting that “Thine Alabaster cities gleam / Undimmed by human tears” seemed to me to be a statement, with “gleam” substituting for “gleaming.” By the time I got to high school, however, I felt that this was a lie: the cities were not alabaster, they were pretty grimy, and they were undimmed by a lot more than mere human tears. But then – realizing that the musical setting was at odds with what I’d been coming to know of versification and syntax – I saw that, of course, what Katherine Lee Bates had written was that the patriot dream sees alabaster cities gleaming, undimmed by human tears, but only “beyond the years,” not yet. Bates was no fool.

This was true of so many texts that I was asked to sing at school: the musical setting did strange things to them that had to be figured out. But before they had come clear, I would be left with puzzling utterances, incomplete sentences, hanging phrases wonderful in themselves, paratactic to anything else. I think this allowed me, by the time I got to high school, to be able to read some twentieth-century poetry of the most problematic kind with a certain amount of ease, since I was used to the mysteries of these dangling phrases and clauses. And the music itself was very, very important for me.

My father’s input into my mental life was of a different kind from my mother’s. She was widely read, bilingual in German almost since birth, and fluent in French. She had a lot of opinions and was, as I said, the source of marvelous one-liners. As a

result, I grew up with one-liner opinions, often comically phrased, from my mother on all sorts of things. Although she was formally the teacher, it was my father who really taught me how to teach. I associate him with a moment that was, for me, a primal scene of explanation. In the late 1930s, I read a story about “atom smashers” in some boys’ magazine. (I think it was the Boy Scout magazine *Boys’ Life*, which I read avidly before I was even a Cub Scout.) I figured out what the word *atom* meant from the context; but then I heard my mother utter the phrase “a molecule of water.” Eureka! I decided that an atom must be a minimal entity of something hard and a molecule a minimal entity of some liquid.

I mentioned this discovery to my father one day when I was about seven or eight. It was at breakfast on a Sunday morning – for some reason, I have an indelible memory of the quality of the light streaming over the table. “Look,” my father said, laughing gently as he took a sugar cube out of the bowl, “I can break this apart into two pieces, and it’s still sugar. Now imagine my breaking it down further and further and further – even with fingers so small you could only see the fingers under the microscope – the pieces getting smaller and smaller and smaller. Finally, there’d be a bit so small that it would still be sugar, but if I broke it apart further in any way, the parts of it wouldn’t be sugar anymore. That would be a molecule of sugar. But its parts would be carbon, oxygen, and hydrogen.” Thus he introduced me to the notion of the structure of matter.

I’ve never forgotten my father’s tone of voice that morning and everything that went with it. It seemed to me to be a paradigm of how to explain something to another person. But it wasn’t until I was in my mid-twenties that I had the ability – and the desire – to follow my father’s example, because at college I was a terrible mess as a student. I had gone to the Bronx High School of Science, which was a wonderful place in the late 1940s, and had fortunately learned a little more about science than most poetical people do. I also learned a lot from my father in conversation. I took a very good journalism course that taught me a lot about writing generally, and about taking responsibility for what one wrote, and I was on the high school newspaper. For the most part, however, my cultural education came not from school but from simply reading books by myself.

I did have one musical mentor in my junior and senior years, when I had just begun to discover jazz. As features editor of the high school newspaper, I interviewed E.B. White, who was a hero of mine, and Dizzy Gillespie, who was lovely and generous to the two punk kids who came down to Fifty-second Street to talk to him. The older friend who accompanied me on that occasion also introduced me to the notion of what I suppose might be called the morality of connoisseurship. He pointed out that although it was perfectly all right for me to admire the popular clarinetist Jimmy Noone, Johnny Dodds was a much more interesting musician. I dare say a lot of people would have argued just the opposite, but that wasn’t the point. The notion that it was beneath one to like something easily apprehended resonated years later when I

read a wonderful poem by W.H. Auden. (He became very, very important to me from my senior year in high school on.) Writing in “In Praise of Limestone” about a list of faults one might have, Auden listed “or ruin a fine tenor voice for effects that bring down the house.” That chimed with my friend’s early rebuke very well.

Although I enjoyed writing light verse in high school, I had no desire to be a poet at all. I have had a lot of students at Yale who decided they were poets when they were sophomores in high school, but serious people of my generation didn’t think or speak of themselves as poets until something had happened in their work. I didn’t think of myself as one until I’d published my third book of poetry. (However, that was a different world.) At Columbia, I still thought of myself as wanting to be a journalist and worked hard for the daily newspaper my whole freshman year. Then something remarkable happened to me. This was right after World War II and most of the classes were filled with veterans. As a result, college for me was like going to school with a bunch of older brothers. It’s very hard to communicate the mixed parts of seriousness and joy that this involved.

The core curriculum at Columbia entailed studying humanities and what was called “contemporary civilization” together. In freshman year, each of these classes met four days a week, and both had immensely long reading lists. The humanities list for the first semester was more than what you would probably get in two semesters of an equivalent course at Yale. It included Homer’s *Iliad*; almost three-quarters of Herodotus; about the same amount of Thucydides; four plays by each of the Greek tragedians and Aristophanes; Aristotle’s *Poetics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the first few books of the *Politics*; Plato’s *Apology*, *Symposium*, and a good part of the *Republic*; Lucretius; Virgil; and, to cap it off, St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. In other words, it was a very intense Great Books course.

The course in contemporary civilization was a mixture of intellectual, institutional, and cultural history. In the first semester one found oneself reading bits of Dante’s *De monarchia* as a text in the history of thought, and then reading the *Inferno* in the second semester of humanities. In contemporary civilization, every text was contextualized because it was an object in a story. In humanities, you read the texts as isolated masterpieces, with no more context than their chronological order. If you were serious, you had to wonder, “How do I put these together? How do I negotiate the story of reading a masterpiece in isolation and the story of reading something excerpted from a masterpiece in the context of a historical agenda?” You would be asking yourself and the institution (not just Columbia College’s curriculum, but the institution of Knowledge in a broader sense), “What do I do about this?” And the answer you got was, “Uh-huh.” If you were not going to be concerned with the life of the mind, you shrugged off the “uh-huh” and went about your business. But if you were, then the task of picking up the pieces which you had made your own by listening seriously to the “uh-huh” – understanding it as a mandate to think about it – became something that would never leave you. I suppose this has remained true of me.

At Columbia, of course, there were a number of outstanding teachers: Mark Van Doren, Lionel Trilling, and a remarkable man named Andrew Chiappe, who taught Shakespeare to a generation of students but never published a word. Meyer Schapiro, in art history, was another remarkable person to study under. But I also studied “under” my fellow students, quite a few of whom were older than I was, because of the war situation. As far as my education in poetry was concerned, Alan Ginsberg—a very close friend whom I got to know when I was seventeen—was my principal teacher. I also came to know Richard Howard; we were at Columbia together and inseparable a good deal of the time.

After graduating from college in 1950, I knocked about for a bit and did odd editorial jobs. For a while, I wrote liner notes for Vox Records. They had just started to go to Eastern Europe to record because the starving symphony orchestras there would play for peanuts. Vox recorded everything that wasn’t nailed down, brought the tapes back, and produced the records here. This was during the first decade of LP’s and they needed a lot of program notes. But then I decided to go to graduate school and get a degree, because I really wanted to teach.

Columbia’s graduate school was not very interesting for me at the time. Many of the stimulating professors in literature I’d had at Columbia College refused to teach in the graduate school. Then there was the fact that I couldn’t get a teaching assistantship, because there weren’t any. I needed money and I wanted to teach, so I went to the University of Indiana to get my Ph.D. I already had a master’s degree from Columbia, since you had to go through the M.A. program in order to get into the Ph.D. program. It was one of the most cynical things I’ve ever seen. So long as you paid your tuition and signed up for classes, all you had to do to earn a master’s was to take a qualifying exam and write a thesis. I enrolled in certain classes but actually took others. I used the time to learn a little more Greek (although I still have no serious knowledge of the language) and take a course in modal counterpoint. I was fascinated by Elizabethan poetry and music, which became a major interest of mine later on.

In high school, I had learned to play the guitar a little. In my part of the world, you learned to play the guitar in order to participate in the folk music revival, which was pretty much a left-wing movement. I’d had very tolerant, amused parents who had quoted to me something to the effect that anyone who wasn’t a Communist at age sixteen, or who was still a Communist at age twenty, was a failure in life. They were anticommunist, Norman Thomas socialists who, like so many others, became New Deal supporters. I had a mildly Stalinist year and a half in high school, which was easy during World War II because the Russians were our allies. In journalism class, I learned about other kinds of anticommunism. One day, when we were talking about slanting the news, our teacher held up the front page of the *New York Journal-American*, the Hearst afternoon newspaper. The story was about the Russians beginning to push the Germans back, and the headline read: “REDS MENACE FIVE TOWNS.” A

bunch of too-clever-by-half high school kids started whooping when they contemplated the newspaper's choice of verb, echoing the familiar phrase "the Red menace."

So I learned to play the guitar and to sing all sorts of folk songs, as well as the songs of the International Brigade, which burned themselves into my memory. I'd briefly been a member of a communist front group called American Youth for Democracy (formerly the Young Communist League). By the time I got to Columbia, however, I had friends who were veterans and who showed me how the Stalinists had taken over the American Veterans Committee, a liberal group set up as an alternative to the American Legion. My political education started that first year. But I suppose if I am not a political imbecile, I'd lay that to three writers who were, in a sense, my moral teachers. One of them was George Bernard Shaw, whom I read voluminously, starting in about sixth grade. Later on there were W.H. Auden—with whom I became fairly close, but only after reading his poetry—and George Orwell. These three instructive "voices" were continually in my head. I think I kept my political sanity because Shaw had given me a long head start. My maturing skepticism came from his plays—even the stage directions and, of course, the prefaces. I started reading *St. Joan* when I was too young to understand all of it, but a lot came through nevertheless.

Reading the English Bible had a similar effect on me. I had heard from my mother and other people that the King James Bible was very "poetic." Eventually, I decided that it was considered poetic because much of the language was archaic or obscure to modern readers. Unlike Shakespeare, the King James Bible wasn't available in annotated editions, with notes warning about words that looked familiar but didn't mean what you thought they did. Instead, you had to construe the Bible by yourself. Sometimes you had to come up with an imaginative construction of the text that didn't correspond at all to the original. So much of this was resonant for me—not just the syntactic patterns but the words themselves. I remember coming to this conclusion early on in first reading St. Paul's "Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face" (1 Corinthians 13). Like nearly everybody else in my generation, I thought, "Oh, I get that: our vision is mediated now, but it won't be then. It's like you have to look at an eclipse of the sun through dark glass." This was before I knew that "glass" here meant "mirror" and that "darkly," in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, meant "problematically" or "enigmatically." The Bible was full of those semantic traps. I knew a lot of the Old Testament simply from hearing it read to me by my parents, and then hearing some of it again in Hebrew. I didn't understand much of the synagogue service when I was very young—my parents were only middlingly observant—but at the age of ten I finally started learning some Hebrew and gradually began to understand bits of the Hebrew Bible. But the King James Bible is so much of the fabric of my experience of the English language that I can never separate it out.

The first verse of mine that I really think of as engaging any poetic seriousness was some translations of Baudelaire that I did when I was a freshman in college. But although I kept on writing poems, I didn't start thinking of myself as a poet until I

was at least thirty. I'd graduated from Columbia, quit graduate school after getting my M.A. there, and went to Indiana University. I.U. was just starting to rise up from the murk at the bottom of the barrel of the Big Ten, but it had a very good music school and a remarkable program in genetics; while I was there, a visiting English geneticist named Avrion Mitchison told us the latest gossip about the Crick and Watson discovery.

Although I.U.'s English Department was not very good at that time, I went because something called the Kenyon School of English had moved there. That remarkable institution had been started at Kenyon College by the poet, critic, and editor John Crowe Ransom. During the 1940s, he had forged an odd alliance between the southern agrarian intellectuals, represented in the important quarterlies the *Kenyon Review* and the *Sewanee Review*, and the New York Trotskyites, whose journal was *Partisan Review*. What the two groups had in common was a devotion to modern literature, which the philological establishment did not like, and a scorn for middlebrow vulgarity. They were both anti-Stalinist, although from totally different political directions, so that people like Phillip Rahv, Irving Howe, Lionel Trilling, and Alfred Kazin, on the one hand, and Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks, on the other, could find common cause. As a result, *Partisan Review* during the 1940s was full of anomalies. For example, "East Coker," one of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, was first published in the United States in *Partisan Review*, that hotbed of all that Eliot claimed to loathe. That he would want to publish in the magazine run by "rootless cosmopolitans" is of historical interest.

The Kenyon School's aim was to supplement the philological agenda of graduate schools in literature, all but a few of which offered nothing of what I'd had in Columbia College as an undergraduate – that is, an ongoing, vibrant tradition of literary criticism as a central discourse in itself. It started by holding six-week summer sessions at Kenyon College in Ohio and then moved to Indiana University at the invitation of a brilliant and resourceful dean. I went to Indiana partly because I knew that the faculty of what was then called the School of Letters were the people I wanted to talk to. In my first year there, my life was saved by the visiting critic from the School of Letters. (Every year, one stayed on after the summer session for the academic term.) His name was Francis Fergusson and he not only was a marvelous critic and theoretician of theater but also wrote on Dante and other things. Aside from his, the courses in literature were mostly unexciting and intellectually unimaginative literary history.

The required course in Anglo-Saxon was taught by a remarkable kook named Harold Whitehall, a Lancashire man who'd been trained in historical philological method in England. Whitehall loved poetry of all kinds and would recite anything at the drop of a hat. He had come to know quite a bit about more modern structural linguistics as well. So, for example, alongside all the old official stuff, we were given an attempt at a phonemic analysis of the West Saxon dialect to study. This exercise introduced me to linguistics and inspired me to take Whitehall's courses in Middle

English dialectology and Old Norse. I found all this fascinating and began to read linguistics a bit. This was very important for me, because up to then I'd known nothing about post-Saussurean synchronic linguistics.

At the end of my second year, when I was about to start writing a dissertation, I decided to try to solve certain problems that I felt existed in talking about poetic meter. An older literary scholar of some authority had written that Chaucer's line "really has only three stresses," or words to that effect. When I read that sentence, I flung the book across the room in a fit of rage, wondering whether the author ought to be horsewhipped for the "three" (which seemed just wrong), or for "really" (which was insufferably callow, philosophically), or for the careless way he used "stresses." I then read a remarkable history of English metrics by a man named T.S. Omond, a centuries-long history of folly and confusion, of people misunderstanding what previous writers had meant by a word. Believing I could sort out this terminological mess, I had a vision of a dissertation. I wanted to map out different English metrical modes, styles, and devices as if in a kind of dialectology. In other words, I wanted to treat certain kinds of poetic convention, down to a particular poet's style, as being like a spoken idiolect.

Just as I was starting to work on my dissertation, by monumental good luck I got elected to the Society of Fellows at Harvard and went there in the fall of 1954 as one of eight junior fellows. They were an extraordinary group that included Stanley Cavell, George Kateb, Noam Chomsky, Paul de Man, Marshall Cohen, Donald Hall, and Henry Rosovsky. I learned a tremendous amount from them. Of the senior fellows, the ones I learned most from were Harry Levin, Renato Poggioli, and W.B. Quine. Then there was E.O. Wilson, who was working on ants and taught me something about the pragmatics of taxonomy without knowing he was teaching me at all. One night at dinner, during a lull in the conversation, I overheard him say, "Of course, I could characterize an ant as a small social wasp without wings" – a wonderful, beautiful sentence. I thought a lot about it what it might mean for, and about, classification in general.

I was still working on my little metrical project and thought I had it all worked out. One day while crossing Harvard Yard, I felt I'd "discovered" the metreme, a minimal entity in a poetic metrical system, based loosely on Saussure's concept of the phoneme as a sort of atom of a particular language. That is, I decided – as many French literary theorists would later decide – that Saussure's method of analyzing language could be applied to all sorts of linguistic and other human behavior. I worked it all out and expanded it into a kind of structuralist model for metrical analysis, which I then wrote out in numbered paragraphs. (Such was the nature of my pseudo-scientism, which I soon outgrew.) I avoided the traditional terminology that was bogged down in misunderstandings. Speaking of "long" and "short" syllables in English just as in Greek and, somewhat differently, in Latin (in English, stress is prominent and syl-

labic “quantity” isn’t really that at all), I thought my analysis was going to cut through this history of fudge.

I showed my work to Chomsky and a few others, who pointed out inconsistencies, and then worked on it some more. After putting it in a drawer for a month, I took it out and looked at it again. “What is this good for?” I asked myself. “The people who write badly about meter aren’t going to learn anything from this: they’d be incapable of following it or of knowing what was wrong in the first place. Otherwise, they’d have figured it out for themselves and not written the way they had.” This was a blessed moment for me, because it freed me from a lot of other theoretical pretensions.

Later on, when I returned to Yale in the 1970s after a hiatus, I was very glad to have won that freedom. All the pragmatic skepticism seemed to have been drained from literary studies, in favor of certain great developments in literary “theory.” When I gave poetry readings around the country in those years, people in the local English department would often ask, “Oh, isn’t Yale a nest of deconstructionists?” I would point out that Paul de Man was not in the English Department and that, contrary to what some people said, Harold Bloom was not a deconstructionist. Talking about his and de Man’s theoretical views in the same breath was a little like some West Country clergyman in England in 1640 saying, “Oh, you know, Calvin and Loyola and that crowd.”

At Harvard, I was able to indulge my interests in Elizabethan and medieval music. The early-music boom had not occurred yet, save for Noah Greenberg’s New York Pro Musica Antiqua. As a child, I had heard some madrigals by Weelkes, Byrd, and Wilbye through the recordings my parents had by a group called the English Singers. At Columbia, I had written my master’s thesis on what happened to the language of Elizabethan poetry – syntactically, tonally, and otherwise – when it was set to music. I suppose this interest stemmed from my early insight into how syntax and music fitted or didn’t fit, and also from my experience singing in the Columbia chorus and studying counterpoint. Since there were barely any lutes for sale in those days, I adjusted my guitar to lute tuning and learned to play many of the easier lute accompaniments in that repertory.

By the time I got to Harvard, I had acquired a lute from Suzanne Bloch, who was the one lute teacher I’d ever had. (The daughter of the composer Ernst Bloch, she recorded lute music in the late 1940s.) I played with the Camerata of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the precursor of the present Boston Camerata. The museum had a collection of historic instruments and the endowment stipulated that they had to be kept in shape and played. At Harvard, I played through a good bit of Renaissance music at the same time I was studying it. I also spent time reading philosophy, which I had shied away from ever since the disappointing introductory courses I’d taken at Columbia. Unfortunately, I had developed a vulgar and easy poetic distaste for philosophy. At Harvard, I came to learn and think much about the battle between poetry and philosophy, starting with Plato, but in order to do so, I had to learn to respect the

enemy. I've found that many poets who declare war on philosophy don't know their enemy, which makes their battle so inconsequential.

I eventually came to write a book (which I subsequently submitted to Indiana as my dissertation) on music as a subject for poetry in Renaissance England. *The Untuning of the Sky* was started in my last year in the Society of Fellows and finished after a year of lecturing at what was then called Connecticut College for Women. After getting my Ph.D., I came to Yale in the fall of 1959. Here I met Harold Bloom and Geoffrey Hartman, who were a little ahead of me and from whom I learned incalculable amounts during my first five or six years on the faculty. In 1958 I had published my first book of poetry, which W.H. Auden had selected for the Yale Series of Younger Poets. I thus started to teach at Yale with a cluster of interests, but avowing that I would not let my writing of poetry in any way seem to compromise my academic credentials.

I strove very hard to keep my poetry and my academic work separate. In part, this was a result of the impersonality of the high modernism in which I had been schooled. Perhaps it was also prompted by a now-outmoded sense of decorum: when you talked about poetry or any other subject, you talked about it, not yourself. When asked to list my academic publications, I would never include poems. In time, however, my academic critical writing started to have a great deal more to do with my poetry, and I found myself wanting to write not solely as either a scholar or a theoretician. I didn't want to write about literature as someone who had merely written poetry, and yet the fact that I had written poetry became more and more important to my teaching and critical writing. And so these two things that started out together and later diverged were eventually rejoined, having been separated only by possible categories in the sociology of knowledge.