

Roots and Play: Writing as a 35-Year-Old Children

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When I started making up nursery rhymes for my kids, ten years ago, I knew what a good children's poem should be. This made things very tidy. I could ensure that every poem included at least one attribute of great children's verse, and I could discard any poem that accidentally got written without one. And since this conference is devoted to children's literature, I would like to share with you that beautiful thing I understood so clearly way back then: the Essence of Children's Poetry.

I would very much like to share it; unfortunately, I can't. For the essence of children's poetry went clean out of my head about two years after I started writing those poems, and today for the life of me I can't remember what it was. All I recall is that I used to know what constitutes a good kid's poem, and now that I write and read them aloud all the time, I don't. At least not the way I used to.

For most of my doctrinaire notions went kaplooeey, boring the children I foisted them on even more than they were boring me. I would read the poems I was working on to my daughters and their friends and later their classes at school. It was pretty embarrassing at times. For who can ignore that diffident squirm and then that patter of little tongues, as you plod doggedly through a poem or story that *should* work, by every theory under heaven it should!?

But the question is disingenuous. "Who can ignore the boredom of his listeners?" A manic writer can. In fact, a poem has to flop resoundingly six or eight times before he admits, theory or no theory, that it's a bomb. Finally, though, the excellence of the theory is no match for the squirming of the behinds.

At the same time, some improbable notions for poems jelled tolerably well, even though they made hash of my hardest-won critical dogmas about children's poetry. Something, I began to realise, was out of synch. There seemed to be no direct connection between knowing what a poem should be and being able to write it; sometimes the theory helped, sometimes it hindered. Eventually I lost interest altogether in the Essence of Poetry, since it was no use in writing poems. And I wound up with a completely promiscuous, catch-as-catch-can sense of

the thing. If a notion or an approach works, it's good; if it doesn't, it isn't; and you never know which will happen till you try. That is now the sum of my theoretical wisdom about children's poetry.

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I can't tell you what children's poetry *should* be like, then. Even if I knew, it might scare away poems that want to be something different. But more than that, I can't even tell you what children's poetry *is* like. I mean two things by that, the first rather superficial. There just isn't enough English-Canadian children's poetry to justify a special session on it. But beyond that, it would be a fraud for me to speak to you about "Children's Verse in English: A Poet's View."

I have great respect for critical over-views, when they are thorough and lively. But my own approach is at the opposite extreme. Like any other kids' poet worth his salt, I act as if children's verse in English existed for the sole purpose of letting me rummage through it for rhythms, ideas, and starting points for poems of my own. I try not to borrow or imitate, of course. Rather, I try to steal: to assimilate completely what the masters in the field have done, to make it my own so I can go and do otherwise, pursue my own proper necessities. It is like a child's relation to his parents. (My "parents", though it may not show in any extensive way, are Carroll and Milne--master of the lunatic muse, and master of the domestic, inward muse.)

While I could map what does and doesn't light up for me as a writer, then, that map would have nothing to do with balanced history or analysis. It would tell you what was nourishing and exciting me--what I might steal from fruitfully some day. But, in that case, a poet's most cogent commentary on other literature comes in the poems he writes. Dressing it up as pseudo-objective criticism is kind of silly.

So I'll content myself with telling you how children's poems come at me. Not whether I write longhand or with a typewriter (the former), nor how many drafts I do ("scores"). Questions like that have their own gossipy interest, but the trouble is that after you've heard the answers you're no wiser than before. Let's brush past them and look at three things which are more challenging. It's only since *Alligator Pie* and *Nicholas Knock and Other People* were completed, two years ago, that I've come to understand why I did many of the things I did. These retrospective discoveries are what I mean to look at.

You may wonder whether such lightweight, kibitzing poems can yield up "discoveries" at all. Please relax. They can't. And I'm not about to start torturing symbolic meanings out of them, or performing similar indignities. In fact, it would be rude to take up your time commenting on my own poetry at all.

But that's not what I want to talk about. My subject is the experience of writing children's poetry.

1. WRITING AS A 35-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN

I write as a 35-year-old child. That is a paradox, I suppose, but it's the only way I can say what I mean. In fact, to really say it I have to make the statement more outlandish still: namely, "I write as a 35-year-old children."

What does that mean?

Like most adults, I have a number of children trapped, held in suspension, in my nervous system. I can't find the right physical image for this, so I have trouble expressing the notion. But it is such an everyday experience that I don't question it. Thus I find I can enjoy a two-year-old's fun, hold my breath at her tribulations, get bored with her silliness--and do so as a fellow two-year-old. (I also do so as an adult, of course--in different proportions--but that is not what I mean now.) And I feel a similar resonance with a six-year-old, a ten-year-old, a twelve-year-old. There are a whole series of children in me who twig to the world in their own terms, even though they usually need a real child on the playground or in the living room to show them how again.

And the key to writing for children, for me at least, is to get in touch with one of those children in myself and then follow his nose, going wherever the child's interests lead me--whether or not the adult in me is also pleased. Ideally, they both will be. But to begin with I try to suspend the adults judgements, though with a proviso I'll come to later.

That often leads to neat poems. On the other hand, if I start from my adult notions of what a child will enjoy, or should enjoy, I wind up writing something very pompous, or condescending, or dull: something pasted onto the child's inner life from the outside, like a taxidermist's label. I wish I could read you a few examples, because I've certainly written enough of them. But I hope I've pitched them all out.

I'll read one that comes fairly close, though. It's a fantasy of running away, and even now I'm not sure whether the adult's amused consciousness intrudes into it in an unacceptable way.

GOING UP NORTH

I'm going up north and live in the bush
Cause I can't stand parents that nag and push!

I'm going up north and live in a shack,
So tell my parents that I'm never coming back!
And I won't write letters,

But I think I'll take a snack.

I'm going up north and I'll see strange sights.
I'll be on my own with the Northern Lights.
I shall whistle to myself

When the grizzly bears prowl,
And they'll say to one another
As they snuffle and growl,

I don't mind parking meters that
Get lippy now and then,
But I can't stand fairies going round
And doing good to men.

I've found myself writing cautionary children's poems fairly often--"cautionary" in the sense of defining satirically a bombast or a cheap didacticism I found in other kid's poems and was afraid of in myself. The kid was enjoying the irreverence, as I wrote, and the adult was reading himself a lecture. Then I could feel OK writing poems that were unaffectedly tender. For instance:

THE FRIENDS

When Egg and I sit down to tea
He never eats as much as me.
And so to help him out I take
A double share of chocolate cake.
And when we get a special treat
He says he really couldn't eat—
Not even fudge, or licorice loops
Or butterscotch caramel ice-cream soup.
And likewise, if the juice is fine,
He always whispers, "Please drink mine."
And since Egg is my special friend
I gulp it down to the bitter end.
And Eggy says, when I hug him tight,
"I'm glad I had an appetite."

When Egg and I go out to play
His legs are always in the way,
And so he seems to fall alot
And always in a muddy spot.
And since Egg is my special friend
I fall down too; and I pretend
To cover myself with guck and dirt
So Eggy's feelings won't be hurt.
And when my mother starts to frown
I splain that Egg kept falling down,
And she throws us both in the washing machine,
And Eggy says, "I'm glad you're clean."

And when we go to bed at night
He sort of hates to shut the light.
He mentions, in a little voice,
"I hear a burglar kind of noise."
And also, "That looks like a ghost!"
And since Egg is my special friend
I say that ghosts are half pretend.
I tell him everything's all right,
And I hide in the covers with all my might,

And then I get up and turn on the light.
And when the room is friends again
We snuggle down, like bears in a den,
Or hibernating in a cave.
And Eggy says, "I'm glad we're brave."

I've sometimes gotten a charge when I've read that poem. Boys, as we've begun to acknowledge, are often taught not to allow their own feelings of tenderness and intimacy. When I started reading "The Friends" with a good many seven-year-old boys present, say, I wondered whether the poem would stand too close to them, make them feel like sissies if they enjoyed it.

What happened? What I'd hoped for, but hadn't trusted in. They sat very quiet, and they didn't usually laugh where the girls did. But they seemed to absorb the thing through their pores, almost, and sometimes they came up afterwards and told me it was the best poem we'd done. I felt ashamed of myself for doubting the strength of the tenderness in boys.

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I hope it's clear by now that I don't romanticize children, in spite of the fact--or maybe because of the fact--that I go on being children myself. "I write as a 35-year-old kids" doesn't mean that I just adore kids, nor that I would love to go back and be one again. (Later childhood and adolescence, certainly, are years I would have to be dragged back to kicking and screaming.) Moreover, I have met a fair number of children, many on a first-name basis, and they are the same mixture of good, bad, and indifferent as the grown-ups I know. Many are rather dull people; some are very much alive, or winningly gentle or bright or brave; and some are exceptionally grabby, sneaky or cruel. I don't adore children en masse any more than I adore their elders en masse, nor myself en masse. I guess I'm touched to the quick more often by kids than by adults. But when someone goes misty-eyed over the pristine virtues of childhood, I'd like to quell him with a Hallmark greeting card.

I think particularly of people who eulogize the child's intuitive love of fine stories or poems. Baloney! My own three kids are utterly indiscriminating, as all of us were at their age. They can be galvanized by *Alice in Wonderland*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Peter Rabbit*, *Where the Wild Things Are*. But they can also be transfixed by the tackiest Little Golden Book or Batman comic. I can see no difference between the qualitative pattern of children's reading and that of adults' reading; both are a hodge-podge. So when I write as a 35-year-old children, it gives me no privileged access to imaginative excellence. Kids themselves don't have such privileged access.

There is one difference I do cherish, though. Children lie just as often as grown-ups, I suppose. But very few young children have learned to punish and inhibit their immediate feelings to the extent most adults have. So in one sense children are more honest. Their feelings are

a mixture of nasty and nice, and the mixture is no more antiseptic than in grown-ups. But kids are more open about those feelings. Their lies tend to be transparent, to travel in parallel with their real emotions--be they joyous, sadistic, or whatever--and to leave those emotions still intact and expressible, though decreasingly with time. To write as an adult children, then, means reconnecting with the capacity to feel directly.

It means experiencing a partial integration of the adult and the children in oneself--which is what many grown-ups discover when they return to children's books with their kids. If a person is looking for sappy escapes, of course, he may not want that partial integration; he may simply try to leave the adult behind and regress, go on a delusory nostalgia trip. That's surely one of the common sins adults perpetrate in this field. I found I couldn't make it through the domestic scenes in *Peter Pan*, when I came back to it five years ago. They're shot through with that sappiness, that wilful attempt to jettison maturity. In real integration, though, there should surely be room for anger, cowardice, wicked humour--as well as for the safe, acceptable feelings that are all a sentimental adult is willing to discover in the child. For the point is to experience things directly, not to experience only nice things.

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And if the two do fuse with one another--the adult's integrity, which has had the chance to *be* integrity because it has been tested so many times, been deflowered so often, and the child's capacity for play-- if the two do fuse, in the writing and then in the reading, there can arise the kind of simplicity which occasionally comes into being on the yonder side of complexity. This matters. It means that children's literature mediates something that is also found in lyric poems and songs, and is more commonly noticed there by critics: that is, a distillation or unification of experience. This is something I first came to in writing children's verse.

My adult poetry is meditative. It struggles to trace the process by which a person meditates on dissonances and disharmonies, finds them chiming against one another and sometimes orchestrating a music that achieves its own concord--bitter or sweet-- without ever ceasing to express the dissonant particulars. But until I started writing kids' poetry, I was pretty well mired in the dissonance of those particulars. I could seldom find a way to release the lyric sense, which sometimes comes, that the particulars are sounding for once in the one key, that they are suffused with a coherence of being. Such a coherence may be joyous or despairing or terror-stricken or zany, but for a time it holds, and the universe comes whole. It is easy to see why first love gives rise to so many lyrics, for it lets the world cohere.

That one-ing of the world, I think, is the essence of lyricism. Lyricism is not simply a singing rhythm or a felicity of phrase, but the perception of a coherence of being. That makes a single singing self possible again--or at least glimpsable--in infectious, empathetic response. Lyrical rhythm and phrasing spring from that; they are its

sacramental embodiment. (If they are merely feigned without the real knowledge of such a coherence, of course, they are a silly and rather boring form of sacrilege.)

Lyrics, then, are ceremonies of a unity of being. They spring from a simplified, a singlified knowing of the world. This may be a more true or a more false knowing in any particular case, but I believe that is what they are. And *Winnie the Pooh* and *The Secret Garden* and the best poems of Walter de la Mare bespeak that same deep unity of being. Hence they are as integral to our literature as the lyrics of Herrick or Burns.

And what happened for me, when I made contact again with the direct sense of living of those children suspended in me, and tried out the traditional conventions of poetry which somehow felt right for its expression, was that I began to find a voice for lyric moments which do not cancel out complexity but resolve it for a time. My adult poetry could mediate the perception of complexity more or less adequately, but it was in children's poetry that the climactic simplicities often emerged--as well, of course, as the momentary simplicities that spring simply from feeling totally healthy or totally piqued. I don't want to claim that the lyric is superior to the meditative, or vice versa. Indeed, I will not be content till I can include both in the one poem. But I do notice, with a good deal of interest, that it was only when the adult and the child started writing poems together that I could even get near the lyric.

Let me read you two poems. One is from the beginning of these books, the other from the very end. A person might ask whether they even belong in the same continuum of poetry, but to me it is so self-evident they do that I won't even try to explain why, except to say that both are lyrics.

SKYSCRAPER

Skyscraper, skyscraper,
Scrape me some sky:
Tickle the sun
While the stars go by.

Tickle the stars
While the sun's climbing high,
Then skyscraper, skyscraper
Scrape me some sky.

SUMMER SONG

The light was free and easy then,
Among the maple trees,
And music drifted over
From the neighbours' balconies;
Half my mind was nodding
With the asters in their ranks,
And half was full to bursting
With a hungry kind of thanks.

It wasn't just the mottled play
Of light along the lawn.
I didn't hope to live back all the
Good times that were gone;
All I wanted was to let
The light and maples be,
Yet something came together as they
Entered into me.

And what was singing in my mind
Was in my body too:
Sun and lawn and aster beds
Murmuring, I do—
Earth, beloved, yes, I do I
Too am here by grace,
As real as any buried stone
Or any blade of grass.

Breath and death and pestilence
Were not revoked by that.
Heavy things went on, among
The calm magnificat.
Yet as I sat, my body spoke
The words of my return:
*There is a joy of being, which you
Must be still and learn.*

2. ROOTS

How far have we got? I don't write "for" children; I write *as* children, as an adult children. And I write well only when there is an integration of the two: the child sniffing out the words and subjects that excite him, the adult supplying the craft, the pacing, the decorum that will let those words and subjects come into their own as poems, as objects of use for other children and other adults. And in the directness and wholeness which sometimes prevail for that adult child, I find possible a lyrical clarity that has mostly escaped me in writing just for adults.

But what kinds of things excite you when you start on this way? I can group them in two areas: roots, and play. First, roots.

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There is a shock of recognition that lies in wait in books, which many readers in this country have discovered largely in the last few decades. It is so basic that many of you will find it unthinkable that we've taken so long to arrive at it. All I can say is that we find it pretty unthinkable too.

It is the discovery that good writing is not good in a vacuum. It always has roots in a particular time, a particular place, particular lives.

It may "have roots" in a curious way which has to be probed after, for everything it contains may be the antithesis of its particular origin, as in some kinds of fantasy or utopian writing. But it is no less rooted for that, just as a mirror image does not cease to refer to you by being your mirror opposite.

The discovery does not come in these heady, conceptual terms, of course. It arises when you open a book that is saying *your* time, *your* place, *your* life, catching the inflections of how they are more truly than you ever knew they could be captured. Such a book seems to know more about your life than you do, popping up inside the lines of defence of your habitual response to literature. The book is suddenly there inside your life: very daring, very inevitable, very much just there, like a new intimacy you didn't know about till it happened, but already you're at home in it.

The effect is startling. "Oh," you say, "So that's what it was all about. But that's--that is who we *are*. You mean it's OK to just be who you are? Literature is about that?"

This confirmation of what-is, I call "roots." That may need clarifying. The kind of book I'm talking about is "rooted" in locale, to be sure, in its own time and place. But the book in turns *affords* roots to the reader. That means, it affords him the knowledge of his roots. It raises them into visibility; it makes the textures of his everyday life palpable; it lets him discover, as if for the first time, what he knows so intimately that he scarcely knows it at all. When I say "roots" I will usually be thinking of this latter relationship, that of book to reader.

If you have read without knowing about that dimension of reading (which can still give you access to many riches, of course), it comes as a shock, a mild giddiness to discover that you can still have everything you used to have in reading, but you can find roots too. And *King Lear* and "Ode to a Nightingale" are not belittled by that. Far from it, you glimpse how they must have spoken with this extra and primal resonance to the men and women they first rooted. And that is an enrichment of what you've already found in them: the universality that their locality springs loose.

Yet that local rootedness of a work of art is its gift to its own time and place (as it is first drawn from its own time and place), and we can participate in it fully and un-self-consciously only with the art of *our* own time and place. I would say, as a Canadian WASP, that it has been Margaret Laurence, George Grant, and Al Purdy who have most fully bestowed that gift of roots on people like me.

To celebrate them, and to celebrate our discovery of roots itself, is of course not to stop cherishing fine books from elsewhere, nor to blur the proportions of relative excellence that obtain among them all. Whether or not a book is local to you has nothing to do with its final depth or stature. Nor is it even to suggest that this local rooting is the most important element in literature, for if there is nothing beyond locality to a work it is trivial. For that matter, "locality" is itself a relative thing. You may find the setting and folkways of a Russian novel alien, and yet feel immediately at home with the types of character who populate it and

the ways they go about being human. You may still get, in certain ways, that sense of a familiar thing having suddenly been made visible, which is the revelation of roots.

A book in which you recognize the textures of your own day-to-day life can take you unawares, then, can fasten you with a sense of immediacy which is not possible in a book that is not "local". This kind of rootedness is wholly naive, thank goodness, and finally somewhat superficial. But that is not to knock it. If you lack such rootedness, or if you have just won through to it, you appreciate that it can be both naive and superficial and at the same time indispensable.

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Ten years ago, in Canada, people like me were groping their way through these discoveries in an exciting but often awkward, off-balance way. For we are a colonial people; leaving aside the political and economic aspects of the thing for now, we have always been a colony of the imagination, first of England and France, latterly of the United States. While we produced a few good writers in the first hundred years of our life, we did not find the imaginative vocabulary with which to say here and now for ourselves. Since World War Two, though, and particularly since 1960, we have begun to do so. The process is so exciting I can't begin to tell you. It's subject to its own excesses and idiocies, along with a compulsion to reiterate our new truths which can get to be brain-numbing. But those are flaws on the surface of a deep and satisfying claiming and letting ourselves be claimed.

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About 1965, when I was starting to read Mother Goose to my older daughter, all these things were tumbling around in my head in pretty inchoate form. And I found myself starting to chafe. I could hardly believe the subversive thoughts that were stirring in my brain. In one way they seemed ludicrous to me, not worth taking seriously. In another way, I had no choice.

What I was thinking was this. "Here is a little girl, not quite two, and she is getting bounced and tickled to the rhythms of tuffets and millers and pipers and pence, of curds and whey, of piglets and plum pudding and pease porridge hot, and she hasn't the slightest idea what a single one of them is. For shame! Thought control! Mother Goose is an imperialist conspiracy!"

But that seemed pretty silly--if only because, had she been getting bounced to the rhythm of fire hydrants and hockey sticks and T-4 slips, she wouldn't have known what *they* were either. And I certainly didn't want to deprive her of the fun and magic of Mother Goose. Was the argument going to carry me in a doctrinaire, book-burning direction? I hoped not.

"Still," I went on to myself, "isn't it bizarre that before she's two years old this child should be learning the lessons we Canadians know

by heart in our cells and bloodstreams: that the imagination leads always and only to the holy city of elsewhere, that we enter it as barbarians from outside the gates? 'The imagination can never play on what is immediate in our lives': do I really want to teach my daughter that? At the age of two?''

Well, I thought, that's not entirely true either. Mother Goose, or *King Lear*, is about our lives. About the delight in rhythms and words chasing themselves in and out, about the destiny on earth we share with people in Renaissance England. There's something portable in them.

But while I agreed with this, and still do, I couldn't escape the sense that you are poorer if you never find your own time and place speaking words of their own. Finally I made a dim, murky discovery, which struck me with the full force of the banality it possesses, and yet felt momentous and almost illicit to me, since I had never heard it said out loud before.

The nursery rhymes I love, and that my daughter loves, are necessarily exotic to us. (I still don't know what a tuffet is, and in a perverse way I hope I never find out.) But they were in no way exotic to the people who first devised them and chanted them. "Three little pigs went to market": that once had the everyday immediacy of--of what? "Three little hondas went to Lobblaws," something like that. The air of far-off charm and simpler pastoral life which now hangs over Mother Goose was in no way a part of those rhymes' initial existence. I don't want to wish away that aura now: it is part of their enduring in time. Nor do I want to "modernize" them, that supreme impertinence! But the people who told those nursery rhymes for centuries would be totally boggled if they could suddenly experience them the way children do here and now, as a collection of references to things they never see or do, to places they have never heard of and may never visit, told in words they will sometimes meet only in those verses. Mother Goose never meant those things till the twentieth century. And to look for living nursery rhymes in the hockey-sticks and the high-rise that my children knew first-hand would not be to go on a chauvinistic trip, nor to wallow in a fad of trendy relevance. It would be nothing but a rediscovery of what Mother Goose had been about for centuries.

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So I began writing nursery rhymes. I was rather puzzled where to start, but I scrambled about and tried this and that. The most simple-minded thing to do, in a sense, was just to play with the place-names that dot the country. The Indian names, in particular, have a lovely incantatory lilt to them.

KAHSHE OR CHICOUTIMI

If I lived in Temagami,
Temiskaming, Kenagami,
Or Lynx, or Michipicoten Sound,
I wouldn't stir the whole year round

Unless I went to spend the day
At Bawk, or Nottawasaga Bay,
Or Missinabi, Moosonee,
Or Kahshe or Chicoutimi.

IN KAMLOOPS

In Kamloops I'll eat your boots.	In Aklavik I'll eat your neck.
In the Gatineaus I'll eat your toes.	In Red Deer I'll eat your ear.
In Napanee I'll eat your knee.	In Trois Rivières I'll eat your hair.
In Winnipeg I'll eat your leg.	In Kitimat I'll eat your hat.
In Charlottetown I'll eat your gown.	And I'll eat your nose And I'll eat your toes
In Crysler's Farm I'll eat your arm.	In Medicine Hat and Moose Jaw.

TONGUE TWISTER

Someday I'll go to Winnipeg
To win a peg-leg pig.
But will a peg-leg winner win
The piglet's ill-got wig?

Someday I'll go to Ottawa
To eat a wall-eyed eel.
But ought a wall-eyed eater
Pot an eel that isn't peeled?

Someday I'll go to Nipigon
To nip a goony loon.
But will a goony nipper lose
His loony nipping spoon?

A lot of things I tried in this vein were pretty pedestrian--they had nothing going for them but the purity of their programmatic intent-- and I threw them out. Gradually I realised that the externals didn't have to be so self-conscious. If it seemed right to include something that was explicitly Canadian, fine. If it didn't seem right, equally fine. Here's a bouncing poem that I think lets parts of a child's world into words without any great sweaty effort. It is just as "rooted" as if it were littered with place-names.

BUMP ON YOUR THUMB

Who shall be king of the little kids' swing?
Jimmy's the king of the little kids' swing
*With a bump on your thumb
And a thump on your bum
And tickle my tum in Toronto.*

Who shall see stars on the climbing bars?
Jimmy sees stars on the climbing bars
With a bump on your thumb
And a thump on your bum
And tickle my tum in Toronto.

And who shall come home with the night for his throne?
Jimmy's come home with the night for his throne
With a bump on your thumb
And a thump on your bum
And tickle my tum in Toronto.

There was a mounting sense of excitement as I abandoned the more crusading aspects of the thing, and discovered that there really was a music and a cluster of themes in the lives of the children I knew and was. There was no need to *give* a poem roots in its own time and place; if you just sat still for a while and let things find their own way into you, they would be happy to come as themselves, and sometimes be poems. In fact that was the only way they *could* come, as themselves, unless you forced them into some other mold. And by then the only task was to *make* the one-by-one poems that were entrusting themselves to you--not to lay any kind of trip on them. There was a sense of almost physical release as places, things, experiences, and even individual words, which so far as I knew had never been set vibrating in poems, found their way into these rhymes.

I remember especially the fall of 1973, sitting all day in the basement of an absurd little house we rented in downtown Toronto, listening to the trains' racket along the tracks across the street and waiting on a whole clutch of these poems that installed themselves on the page in a space of six weeks. And about 5:30 every afternoon Linda, whom you've met, would come home from work, and I'd charge upstairs waving some new piece of paper triumphantly, and we'd celebrate and sometimes tinker the thing. And old poems got revised with a flourish, for the umpteenth time, and it was all a bit of a high. Not that those poems were lofty philosophical excursions. In fact, as time went on they seemed to get more and more light-hearted, light-footed, light-headed. But since I usually work like a mole, groping my way through incessant drafts, each a shade more tangled than the previous one, I don't think I'll ever forget that time.

Let me give you a couple of examples that take the business of roots a step further. I became fascinated, a couple of years ago, with a love affair my son was carrying on. To get that into words would be hard, since he was only two at the time. It intrigued me for a couple of months; this was a kind of rooting that had almost nothing to do with the externals of contemporary life (apart from the phenomenon of day-care), and everything to do with the inflections of a child's inner life. That would be a much more challenging kind of rootedness to recreate.

THE SPECIAL PERSON

I've got a Special Person
At my day-care, where I'm in.
Her name is Mrs. Something
But we mostly call her Lynn.
Cause Lynn's the one that shows you
How to Squish a paper cup.
And Lynn's the one that smells good
When you make her pick you up.
She smells good when she picks you up.
She knows a lot of stories
And she reads them off by heart.
There's one about a Bear, but I
Forget the other part.
She bit me on my knee once, cause I
Said she couldn't scream,
And then I sent her in the hall,
And then we had Ice Cream.
I guess I'm going to marry Lynn
When I get three or four,
And Lynn can have my Crib, or else
She'll maybe sleep next door,
Cause Jamie wants to marry Lynn
And live here too, he said.
(I guess he'll have to come, but he's
Too little for a bed.)

And here's another poem in which the quest for roots is taken up with recreating the configurations of our inner life. It's a declaration of friendship. Now, I grew up in a WASP culture, a barely post-puritan society where we want to touch one another, but at the same time we don't want to touch. Canadians have deep passions, like people anywhere else. But we are often not sure what to do with them. I know I find that poetry of flaming affection--how the sun will freeze over before I stop loving you, how my country means everything to me--can sometimes move me, and excite me, but can never be home to me. We don't wear our hearts on our sleeves.

But it is not true that we don't find ways of expressing feelings. We simply express them indirectly, often ironically, in code. I wanted to recreate that ironic code, to speak the words of affection in the emotional shorthand we do use with one another, moving out to the other person and back into oneself at one and the same time, hoping not to be misunderstood. It's a poem of hi-jinks, but it's also seeking the plain articulation of who we are.

WITH MY FOOT IN MY MOUTH

The reason I clobbered
Your door like that,
Is cause it's time
We had a chat.

But don't start getting
Talkative —
I've got a speech
I want to give:

"A person needs
A pal a lot,
And a pal is what
I'm glad I've got,

So thank you. Thank you."
There, it's said!
I feel my earlobes
Getting red,

And I wish you wouldn't
Grin that way!
It isn't healthy,
Night or day.

But even though
You're such a jerk,
With your corny jokes
And your goofy smirk,

I'm sort of glad
You're my old pard.
You're cheaper than
A bodyguard,

And smaller than a
Saint Bernard,
And cleaner than a
Wrecker's yard.

I like the way
You save on socks:
You wear them till they're
Hard as rocks.

And I think those missing
Teeth are keen:
Your mouth looks like
A slot machine

And every time
I see you grin,
I stick another
Quarter in.

You make me laugh
Till we trip on chairs;
One day we nearly
Fell downstairs.

But I think you're kind of
Brave, I guess:
Your no means no,
Your yes means yes,

And even if
It makes you shrink,
You say the things
You really think.

In fact your mouth
Is never closed —
Your tonsils blush,
They're so exposed.

And your tweety voice
Is never quiet;
They must put birdseed
In your diet.

Still, you seem to know,
When we kid a lot,
A time for kidding
A time for not —

Cause often things
I say to you,
I'd ache if any
Body knew.

You choke me up,
You make me sneeze,
I've caught you like
A rare disease:

I'd like to come and
Rub your back;
I'd like to feed you
Crackerjack

And send you messages
In code
And walk along you
Like a road

And bath you till your
Fleas are gone
And stuff you like
A mastodon,

And let's go play
In Kendal Park;
There's still an hour
Before it's dark.

Cause some things last and
Some things end—
I want you always
For my friend.

Finally, the whole question of roots dissolves. If a poem bespeaks our roots by virtue of its inflections--inflections of place, of diction, of feeling--then the search for roots has nothing to do with trying to cram them into a specific poem. It has merely to do with trying to write authentically.

So I've come full circle. When I was twenty I wanted to write well, and I never thought about roots. Fifteen years later I still want to write well, or at least authentically; and while I have been much concerned with roots in the time between, I have begun to ignore them again as a discrete preoccupation.

But that similarity is only apparent, for in the process the whole project of writing has been transformed.

3. PLAY

Coming out of a WASP tradition, I began to discover during my twenties that my emotional responses, even my bodily responses, were cramped in certain ways. There were kinds of feeling that I didn't have access to, although I could sense their power; or if I did have access, I didn't know how to express them in my life; or if I could express them in my life, I couldn't find convincing words for them in a poem. What I coveted, though I might not have described it this way at the time, was the ability to *play*. And it was the possibility of rediscovering that, I think, which drew me to explore the world through the children in myself.

For children play with an absorption and a purity of intent which most adults can only covet. Their play may be trivial or profound, celebratory or cruel. Indeed, this is one of the features of play. It can range from a light-hearted release of energy through to high celebration and to joy; as Huizinga says in *Homo Ludens*, "frivolity and ecstasy are the twin poles between which play moves." It is a self-contained activity which allows those impulses their own space, treats them as our proper necessities.

I take play to be one of the primary estates of being human, as fundamental as eating, procreating, congregating, being conscious. The inhibition and the relative atrophy of that instinct in adulthood seems to me one of the disaster areas of our civilisation.

And that, I guess, is why children's poetry laid such a hold on me. When I look around I realize it was not at all eccentric for this to happen. One of the governing dreams of my generation--perhaps *the* governing dream--has been the liberation of repressed energies. Not just among Canadians, but across much of the western world. Sometimes it is

bottled-up sexual energy that has been wooed, sometimes the political energy latent in a repressed people or class, sometimes the individual/communal energies that can be kindled by rock music or dope. This tendency to experience the world as a battlefield of repressed energy and repressive custom (or capitalism, or consciousness) has flourished before this generation, of course; it is one of the Romantic archetypes. All I'm saying is that it has shaped *our* experience of the world to a very high degree. It seems almost to be an autonomous structure which pre-conditions the way we experience our bodies or language or public life. (To speculate that way, of course, is not to deny that repression and tyranny are common elements in the world. Even if we were "possessed" by that structure of perception when we interpret all sorts of disparate phenomena in its terms, it may help us to see things which are really there. As it may also lead us to see things which aren't there, to react with a crusader's vengeance when it is jejuene to do so.)

Now, to try to reanimate repressed feelings and play by writing children's verse has probably not been the most common expression of this liberation dream. But it seems to be the route I've taken--mostly without realising it, as I have said. And when I look back at the poems now, a lot of them make particular sense in this light. Though the ones that are good poems should also speak to people who have not had to wrestle with the liberation dream so pressingly. At least I hope they will.

* * *

What I was trying to do in these books, then, was to go back and rehearse new gestures of being human. "New," not in the sense that they were unheard of, that no one had ever used this emotional musculature before; but new in the sense of breaking taboos I felt subject to--against play, against rage, against rejoicing.

Sometimes I did so in innocent, shallow poems that simply kicked up their heels, often at a purely verbal level. This happened particularly in *Alligator Pie*, the younger book. For instance:

*THE SITTER AND THE BUTTER
AND THE BETTER BATTER FRITTER*

My little sister's sitter
Got a cutter from the baker,
And she baked a little fritter
From a pat of bitter butter.
First she bought a butter beater
Just to beat the butter better,
And she beat the bit of butter
With the beater that she bought.

Then she cut the bit of butter
With the little butter cutter,
And she baked the beaten butter
In a beaten butter baker.
But the butter was too bitter
And she couldn't eat the fritter
So she set it by the cutter
 And the beater that she bought.

And I guess it must have taught her
Not to use such bitter butter,
For she bought a bit of batter
That was sweeter than the butter.
And she cut the sweeter batter
With the cutter, and she beat her
Sweeter batter with a sweeter batter
 Beater that she bought.

Then she baked a batter fritter
That was better than the butter
And she ate the better batter fritter
 Just like that.

But while the better batter
Fritter sat inside the sitter —
Why, the little bitter fritter
Made of bitter butter bit her,
Bit my little sister's sitter
 Till she simply disappeared.

Then my sister came to meet her
But she couldn't see the sitter —
She just saw the bitter butter
Fritter that had gone and et her;
So she ate the butter fritter
 With a teaspoonful of jam.

Now my sister has a bitter
Butter fritter sitting in her,
And a sitter in the bitter
Butter fritter, since it ate her,
And a better batter fritter
Sitting in the silly sitter
In the bitter butter fritter
 Sitting in my sister's tum.

* * *

It may be poems like this which occasion the charge that I write nonsense. That is a charge I want to deny as strenuously as possible.

Not because all that many of my poems make sense. Some do, of course, but a lot are just kibitzing--just play. Perhaps you can understand why that seems to me already a worthwhile thing to aim at. If such poems *do* play successfully, it would vex and embarrass me to ignore their playing and try to justify them on some other grounds.

But a poem can be an expression of high spirits without being “nonsense”, except by a very general, even sloppy use of the term. I think the word is best reserved for work which unites precise logic and irrationality so as to make each seamless with the other, and in the process off-handedly demolishes many of our official assumptions about reason and the nature of human beings. Lewis Carroll is the master of nonsense; to my mind “The Song of the Mad Gardner” is one of the consummate poems in the language.

It would do great things for my ego if I could believe I wrote good nonsense. But the plain fact is that I very seldom write nonsense of any description, at least not in this more exact sense. There are stray examples of nonsense here and there in the books, and one quatrain of which I am inordinately proud.

THERE WAS A MAN

There was a man who never was.
This tragedy occurred because
His parents, being none too smart,
Were born two hundred years apart.

That *is* nonsense: not great, but good. But, for the most part, what people call nonsense in my work is something different.

Yet when I ask myself, what *is* that “something different”, I become puzzled. I’ve been pushed along by enough varying impulses that I don’t expect to find a single answer. But the problem is that I have trouble finding *any* answer.

Let me say what I mean more clearly. Many of these poems, especially the ones for little kids, are obviously “play.” There is nothing more than that to them. But this can make their content seem completely arbitrary. Take this one:

BOUNCING SONG

Hambone, jawbone, mulligatawney stew,
Pork chop, lamb chop, cold homebrew.
Licorice sticks and popsicles, ice cream pie:
Strawberry, chocolate, vanilla!!!

That is pleasant enough, in an inconsequential way. But would it make any difference if all the words were changed around? Or if most of the words were deleted and new ones put in? In other words, with a poem that is sheer play how can you say whether it’s good play or poor? What is to prevent someone else from stringing together a bunch of funny words and calling them a children’s poem too? Isn’t it all just “nonsense”?

To answer the second-last question first, there’s nothing to prevent them at all. And if they do, and it works, I’ll enjoy the poem and be glad it’s there. But I do know that what looks terribly simple, simple-minded

even--to plunk down a lot of silly words and ideas and make children laugh and skip to them--is a good deal harder than it appears.

I know that by experience. I laboured away mightily at two or three nursery rhymes for every one that I kept. And I discovered it is all too easy to write rhymes that are suitably brainless and absurd, but that somehow never go anywhere. They *should* be just as playful as the good ones, but (if you're working from the child in you) you have to concede that they're not. Somehow they don't get off the ground; you don't like coming back to them, and when you do they just don't give you the visceral lift that is the only mark of success with rhymes of this sort. But there is seldom any obvious reason why this should be so.

Furthermore, I found that fooling around with rhymes--revising them, which I do endlessly--often made a noticeable difference. I could seldom say *why* one ridiculous line worked better than its predecessors, but sometimes it patently did. And, finally, there was the acid test of how other children responded to the things. Here again, it was undeniable that some rhymes seemed to sink into their imaginations, into their bodies almost, like water into a sponge, while others remained clever, inert little exercises that never came home to a single child.

The best example of the first process was the poem "Alligator Pie," which got loose from me about six years ago and has since taken on a remorseless life of its own. It's no longer my poem at all, which I'm glad of because I'm so heartily sick of it. I hear it now in school yards, chanted by kids who don't know my name, and I get CARE-packages from all across the country with dotty new verses, and parents come up to me at parties with menacing expressions and ask if I realise how wretched I've made their lives--their kids have been drumming the wretched thing into their heads for weeks, and would I please write something new? What they really mean is, would I please legislate "Alligator Pie" back out of existence, un-write it? If only I could, I would.

That's my problem, of course--a grievous one. But it raises the question again, what makes some of these playful poems work and others not? It's easy enough to say that the successful ones have references to monsters and dragons and things that fascinate kids, but that turns out to be no answer at all. I can show you just as many poems, far more in fact--including lots of my own rejects--which have those references galore, and kids never make them their own. What *does* make a nursery rhyme work?

I'll venture an answer. A nursery rhyme has to play. And in doing so, it has to be *incantatory*. The sheer sound and rhythm of it have to enact a spell of some sort, one that meshes both with the way the muscles of the body want to move, and with some primitive sense of how the world fits together and flows. At least that is my hunch. You cannot verify or falsify it by looking at the words of a nursery rhyme on the page, for they will simply look back at you. That's like trying to enjoy the score of a piece of music all by itself. You have to have a very young child with you, and you have to do the poem with him or her, very slowly, and with a certain gleeful passion. Let each syllable happen like a new day in your life. Then a rhyme comes something like a birthday, and a quickening in the rhythm like love or a new season.

These similes are not idle, though they do no more than grope after what I mean. It is really possible with good nursery rhymes, especially those that carry very little burden of sense, to encounter the raw elements of poetry in a nearly pure form, Platonically almost. There's nothing else. Rhythm in the words, translating itself from the jounce of your knee through the child's bum and up and down its spine. Sounds that open out like parasols, one by one, a succession of colours, almost meaning something but mainly filling your mutual field of attentiveness one after the other, and sometimes sliding back on themselves when the same sound rhymes. Because the medium of nursery rhymes is oral and communal, you encounter those elemental constituents as an environment, one which triggers the old rhythms of cyclical delight inside you: stability, and the excursions of novelty. Elements of a world. And you can feel those instincts stirring dimly in you, if you help the child give you permission. Nursery rhymes work, then, when they are incantations. When they are anything less than that, they are merely nonsense.

All this may sound like mystification. It isn't. I've often experienced it, though I don't take any of the words I use to describe it as gospel truth. And I have to confess at once that I have very few clear ideas about how the body wants to move or about how sounds can speak the working of the world. I'm not even sure I trust the latter notion, though I find myself compelled to resort to it. Nor do I know how you find rhymes and sounds that do those things; all I ever do is play with words till they feel as if they're working.

So my "explanation" of successful play in nursery rhymes, even if there's something to it, merely retreats to questions which are more imponderable still.

* * *

In the poems in *Nicholas Knock and Other People*, my preoccupation with play went a step further. (I say "further," but I'm not really sure that's right. Raw sound and rhythm, directed by movements of pure delight, anxiety, exuberance--that's about as "far" as a poet can go, in one direction at least,) Anyway: I no longer wrote just playful verse. Many of the poems raised the question, *Can* we sustain play, or joy, or any of the deeper and more vibrant modes of being which tantalize us?

I didn't go at the question philosophically, arguing on this side or that; nor psychologically, looking for answers in our makeup. Rather, I tried to imagine these more vital modes directly onto the page, to find out what would happen. Usually, I see now, I did it by bringing a fairly normal, innocuous character (or narrative voice) into collision with some odd, menacing, lyrical or otherwise extraordinary figure who impinges suddenly on his or her life, and in one way or another raises the question, What are you going to do about *this* way of being alive? Can you assimilate it?

Here's the earliest of these poems:

THE CYCLONE VISITORS

Attila the Hun
Is eating a bun
 At the corner of Yonge and Bloor.
I tell him, "Behave!
Now go get a shave!"
 But he pushes me down in the sewer,
The boor,
 And saunters up Yonge Street, cocksure.

A saint with a glare
And a mountain of hair
 Keeps crying "Repent!" in the park.
He looks like a hermit.
He hasn't a permit,
 And he won't even stop when it's dark:
Queen's Park
 Is no place for a saint after dark.

Rasputin the Monk
Is dancing, dead drunk,
 On the top of the New City Hall.
I've called for a cop.
I've begged him to stop,
 But he will not stop dancing at all—
The gall!
 If he doesn't stop dancing, he'll fall.
You can't *dance* on a New City hall!

It interests me now for a particular reason. It's fixated on the possibility that there is no chance of opening out your life to include the bawdy, the holy, the brawling, the larger-than-life. The tight-lipped disapproval of the speaker is obviously not going to let him take any chances with these zanies. I think that's where I started: imagining the worst.

You can trace a series of similar encounters: with Mr Hoobody, Wellington the Skeleton, the Abominable Fairy, the Thing, and so forth. And the basic question is answered differently each time, since I had no fixed answer to it. "Nicholas Knock" brings the theme into focus more consciously than any other poems; by the time I wrote it, I was beginning to recognize the pattern my imagination kept coming out with. And because "Nicholas Knock" sees the struggle to maintain contact with the emissary of larger life (in this case, the silver honkabeest) as a rite of passage into adulthood, it also serves to round off the project of the two books.

As an aside, could I say that while I still enjoy "Nicholas Knock", I've started to find it simplistic? I think it accepts the line of division between childhood and adulthood as the boundary both between innocence and experience (which I suppose it is), and also between good and evil (which I'm sure it isn't). There should be a few adults in the poem who have fought the same battle as Nicholas and not given in, and a few kids who have already sold out or been crushed. If I ever rework one of these poems again, it will be "Nicholas Knock."

I'm happier with Ookpik, who is another of the vital figures that challenge how we are. He's a dancer, an embodiment of pure lyricism: harmless, pointless, irrepressible. (Though that makes him sound like an allegorical figure, which none of these characters are.) There are four Ookpik poems, and by the last one he has become a kind of totemic figure or tutelary god for the books. The theme of play and the theme of roots fuse in that poem, as they often do.

A SONG FOR OOKPIK

Ookpik,	Through the
Ookpik	Swelter
Dance with	Of
Us	July,
Till our	Ookpik
Lives	Soften
Go	Earth and
Luminous.	Sky—
When the	Dancing
Slush is	Like a
In the	Fallen
Street,	Tear,
Ookpik	Deeper
Touch our	Into
Soggy	Now and
Feet.	Here.
Feed the	Please, in
Headlong	Autumn
Green, in	Apples
Case	Fall,
We do not	Fruit and
Leave it	Leaf and
Living	Earth and
Space	All:
Till the	Ookpik,
Green	Ookpik
World	By your
Gallivants	Grace,
To the	Help us
Voltage	Live in
Of your	Our own
Dance.	Space.

But I think my favourite--if you'll let me indulge myself now at the end--is "The Cat and the Wizard." I wrote it that fall of 1973, in the basement, and even though it turned itself inside-out several times before it wound up this way, it gave me the sense more strongly than

any other poem that it knew exactly what it wanted to be, and my only job was not to muff it. Sometimes I look at it now and I think, Good grief, I *have* written an allegory. The wizard is all play and no roots, and the cat is all roots and no play, and each gives the other what he lacks. But then I go back to the poem and forget about that kind of stuff, for the secret of the thing is that beneath the surface, and symbolically, it's a poem about a cat and a wizard.

THE CAT AND THE WIZARD

1

A senior wizard
Of high degree
With a special diploma
In wizardry
Is trudging along
At the top of the street
With a scowl on his face
And a pain in his feet.

A beard, a bundle,
A right-angle stoop,
And a cutaway coat
Embroidered with soup,
A halo of smoke
And a sputtery sound—
The only real magic
Magician around!

But nobody nowadays
Welcomes a wizard:
They'll take in a spaniel,
Make room for a lizard—
But show them a conjurer
Still on the ball,
And nobody wants him
Or needs him at all.

His bundle is bulging
With rabbits and string,
And a sort of machine
That he's teaching to sing,
And a clock, and a monkey
That stands on its head,
And a mixture for turning
Pure gold into lead.

He carries a bird's nest
That came from the Ark,
He knows how to tickle
A fish in the dark;
He can count up by tens
To a million and three—
But he can't find a home
For his wizardry!

For *nobody*, nowadays,
Welcomes a wizard:
They'll drool at a goldfish,
Repaint for a lizard,
But show them a magus
Who knows his stuff—
They can't slam their latches down
Quickly enough!

2

In Casa Loma
Lives a cat
With a jet-black coat
And a tall silk hat.
And every day
At half past four
He sets the table
For twelve or more.

The spoons parade
Beside each plate;
He pours the wine,
He serves the steak,
And Shreddies, and turnips,
And beer in a dish—
Though all he can stomach
Is cold tuna fish.

But a cat is a cat
In a castle or no,
And people are people
Wherever you go.

Then he paces about
In the big dining hall,
Waiting and waiting
For someone to call
Who won't be too snooty
For dinner and chat
At the home of a highly
Hospitable cat.

And every evening
At half past eight,
He throws out the dinner
And locks the gate.
And every night,
At half past ten,
He climbs up to bed
By himself, again.

For a cat is a cat
In a castle or no,
And people are people
Wherever you go.

3

One day they meet
In a laundromat,
The lonesome wizard,
The coal-black cat.

And chatting away
In the clammy air,
They find they both like
Solitaire,

And merry-go-rounds,
And candle-light,
And spooky yarns
That turn out right.

They stroll together
Chatting still
To Casa Loma
On the hill

And there the cat
Invites his friend
To share a bite,
If he'll condescend;

And, yes, the wizard
Thinks he might —
But just for a jiffy
And one quick bite.

An hour goes by
like a silver skate
The wizard moves
From plate to plate.

Two hours go by,
Like shooting stars.
The cat produces
Big cigars

And there in the darkening
Room they sit,
A cat and a wizard,
Candle-lit.

At last the wizard
Takes the pack
From his creaking, reeking,
Rickety back.

He sets it down
With a little shrug,
And pulls a rabbit
From under the rug.

And before you can blink
He's clapping his hands
And there in the doorway
A peacock stands.

Now he's setting the monkey
Upon its head,
He's turning the silverware
Into lead

And counting by tens
From a hundred to four
And making a waterfall
Start from the floor

And juggling a turnip,
A plate and a dish,
And turning them all
Into fresh tuna fish.

The cat is ecstatic!
He chortles, he sails
From the roof to the floor
On the banister rails,

And soon the whole castle
Is whizzing with things:
With sparklers and flautists
And butterflies' wings,

And all through the night
The party goes on,
Till it stops in a trice
At the crack of dawn

And the wizard installs
His pack in a drawer,
While the cat tidies up
The living-room floor.

And as the sky
Is growing red,
They tiptoe up
The stairs to bed.

The wizard's snore
Is rather weird:
The cat is snuggled
In his beard—

Dreaming of tuna fish
End to end,
And rabbits, and having
A brand-new friend.

*

Perhaps you wonder
How I know
A cat and a wizard
Can carry on so?

Well, if some day
You chance to light
On Casa Loma
Late at night
Go up to the window,
Peek inside,
And then you'll see
I haven't lied.

For round & round
The rabbits dance,
The moon is high
And they don't wear pants;

The tuna fish
Patrol the hall,
The butterflies swim
In the waterfall

And high and low,
With a hullabaloo,
The castle whirls
Like a tipsy zoo.

And in the corner,
If you peer,
Two other figures
May appear.

One is dressed
In a tall silk hat:
The lord of the castle,
The jet black cat.

The other's a wizard
Of high degree.
The wizard is grinning.
The wizard is me.

* * *

I hope what I said about "The Cat and the Wizard" doesn't sound smug. I'm pleased with these two books, but like most other writers I really revolve around the things I haven't written yet. They're my centre of gravity. And when I look back at the books from that obscure perspective, I'm anything but satisfied.

Not so much because of what is in the books, but because of what isn't. I spent so much energy just clearing a way towards rooted play, it seems to me, and so little time making its poems. And I think: there are terrors, and joys, and states of daily despair and amazement which I was barely making passes at here. How could I take this as anything but a first flirtation? trying to pass off mischievousness as bawdy vitality, and a timid sense of discomfort as holy terror?

Then I read the books with grown-ups and kids again, and they do trigger the things out loud I was reaching for, and I no longer know what to think. I don't want to dump on these poems, for some of them are good. Nor do I want to accord them any more respect than they deserve. Finally I turn away from them, back to other poems that are waiting to be written, which I still don't know. They are always what compels me, though I know that once they're written they will slide away from me too, leaving me confused and exultant and depressed.

I remember what I said at the beginning, that the only cogent commentary a poet makes on other literature comes in the poems he writes. That is true of his own work too.