



# Rivers Into Islands III

# Week 2 Highlights

- JK a ‘modernist’ in the spareness, common language and subject matter of his poetry.
- Three of the sources of his poetry:
  - The ‘present moment’
  - ‘History’ as an aspect of ‘place’
  - ‘Found poems’
- Poems to study: ‘Edwardsville before sunrise’; ‘walking in snow’; ‘veterans day’, ‘old settlers day, buckles grove’, and ‘overheard at breakfast #2”.

# Other sources of Knoepfle's Poetry

- Translation or adaptation from other languages
  - Why do poets do this?
- Religion and Social Activism
- Knoepfle raised Catholic, educated and taught in Catholic schools and universities
- John and Peg 'freedom riders' in the South and active anti-war protesters.
  - The two concerns were closely linked
  - John and Peg both 'social justice Catholics'

# Knoepfle as Translator

- Largely considered a ‘regional’ poet, John had a strong interest in poets writing in other languages.
- One of his earliest book publications, *Twenty Poems of César Vallejo*, with Robert Bly and James Wright, Sixties Press, 1962. The first book published of Vallejo in English.
- John contributed English ‘adaptations’ of poems by Hungarian prisoners in *From the Hungarian Revolution*, ed. David Ray, Cornell University Press, 1966.
- In 1985, Spoon River Poetry Press published two volumes of work by Chinese poets, co-translated by Knoepfle and Wang Shouyi.

# Translating Chinese Poems

- John collaborated for decades with Chinese scholar, Wang Shouyi, to translate poems from the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties.
- Wang Shouyi provided a transliteration from the Chinese, and John turned it into poetry in English.
- That's harder than it sounds. Chinese has no tense, gender or person.
- Two books were published by Spoon River Poetry Press and by a Chinese university press in Harbin.
- Poems also circulated in China in pirated editions.

# Wei City Song

Anonymous Tang Dynasty Poet,  
tr. John Knoepfle and Wang Shouyi

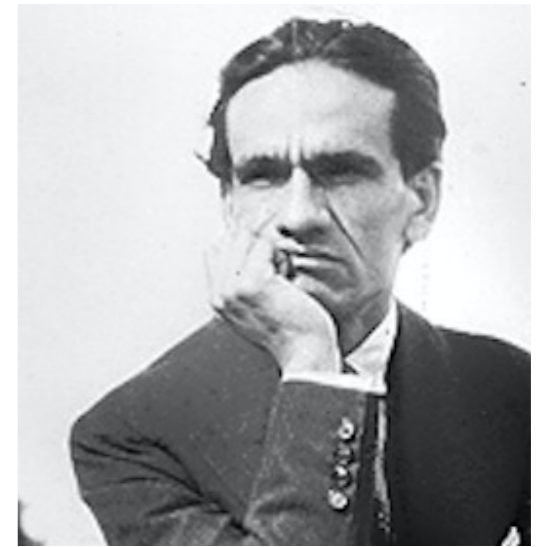
a dawn rain comes  
and settles the dust in Wei City

hotels are soaked deep in dark wet colors  
but the willows are a brighter green

why not one more drink for the road  
although we have had a few already

once you go west of Yang Pass  
old friends are hard to come by

# César Vallejo, 1892-1938



- Peruvian, but lived most of life in Paris and Spain.
- Poetry rooted in European, Peruvian and indigenous heritage.
- Wrote out of a ‘visceral compassion for human suffering . . . He saw the world in piercing flashes of outrage and anguish, terror and pity. . . .He mourned our loss of moral innocences and despaired of the injustice that moves the world.’ — Edith Grossman in Los Angeles Times Book Review.
- Important to Knoepfle’s own view as a social justice Catholic

# Black Stone Lying on a White Stone

César Vallejo, tr. John Knoepfle

I will die in Paris, on a rainy day,  
on some day which I can already remember.  
I will die in Paris — and I do not step aside —  
perhaps on a Thursday, as today is Thursday, in autumn.

It will be a Thursday, because today, Thursday, setting down  
these lines, I have set my shoulder against  
the evil, and never so much as today have I found myself  
with all the road ahead of me, alone.

César Vallejo is dead. Everyone beat him,  
although he never does anything to them;  
they beat him with a stick and hard also

with a rope. These are the witnesses:  
the Thursdays, and the bones of my shoulders,  
the solitude, and the rain, and the roads . . .

*Twenty Poems of César Vallejo*



# The Weary Circles

César Vallejo, tr. John Knoepfle

There are desires to return, to love, not to go away,  
and there are desires to die, fought by two  
opposite waters that will never become isthmus.

There are desires for a kiss that would shroud life,  
that withers in Africa of a fiery agony,  
suicide!

There are desires to . . . not have desires. Lord,  
at you I point my god-murdering finger.  
There are desires not to have had a heart at all.

Spring returns; it returns and will go away. And God  
curved in time repeats himself, and passes, passes  
with the backbone of the universe on his shoulder.

When my temples beat their mournful drum,  
when that sleep etched on a knife hurts me,  
there are desires not to move an inch from this poem!

*Twenty Poems of César Vallejo*

# Agape

César Vallejo, tr. John Knoepfle

Today no one has come to inquire,  
nor have they wanted anything from me this afternoon.

I have not seen a single cemetery flower  
in so happy a procession of lights.  
Forgive me, Lord! I have died so little!

This afternoon everyone, everyone goes by  
without asking or begging me anything.

And I do not know what it is they forget, and it is  
heavy in my hands like something stolen.

I have come to the door,  
and I want to shout at everyone:  
— If you miss something, here it is!

Because in all the afternoons of this life,  
I do not know how many doors are slammed on a face,  
and my soul takes something that belongs to another.

Today nobody has come;  
and today I have died so little in the afternoon.

*Twenty Poems of César Vallejo*

# From the Hungarian Revolution

- John also joined Bly, Wright and other American poets in a group effort to render into English poems by poets imprisoned after the Hungarian Revolution of October-November 1956.
- The poems — many preserved by being committed to memory — were smuggled out by a Hungarian prisoner Tibor Tolles.
- The American poets were careful to make it clear that they did not speak or read Hungarian. Thus these are not “translations” in the strict sense.
- Rather, they worked with Hungarian speakers or literal, prose translations prepared by others, or poems already translated into Spanish or German

# Boundary Stone

The willows that cry to the winds  
protect him on the riverbank.  
A younger sister and a mother  
were looking for him in the evening.

A line of blood drawn thinly  
down the forehead cleaves the face.  
The body lies on its back, a tall stone  
that once stood upright here.

It fixes for all time our new borders.  
Our past has ended with his death.  
What can be the same for us  
when death is bound among these willows?

The nation went to the streets  
on the twenty-third of October,  
and that was yesterday. We cried out  
and our hearts broke open in secret places.

He had no other truth:  
his only weapon was courage.  
A hundred heavy tanks  
ground him under like wheat in the mill.

Today he lies on the riverbank  
among willows, formed in soft grasses.  
He measures us, a stone which no death  
can shatter again between the worlds.

*Adapted by John Knoepfle*

# Religion and Social Activism

- John's work with poems in other languages provide a good segue to our next topic — his religious orientation and social activism.
- Knoepfle's stance as activist and Catholic can be seen in 'Church of St. Rose,' several found poems and the Hungarian and Vallejo translations.
- He and Peg were active in the Civil Rights Movement and — well into their 80s — in anti-war protests.
- He taught in the early SIU-E extension at East St. Louis in late '50s, and was a consultant to Upward Bound in the 1960s.

# Civil Rights Activity

Knoepfle was a concise and graceful prose writer. Here is his account of a bus trip through the South, from *I Look Around for My Life*.

*In those restive days in the 1960s, I would be called out of myself as so many were. I went on one occasion to the South on a bus out of St. Louis, many of my fellow passengers having more experience than I did with civil protest. When the bus traveled the highway into Birmingham, the driver pointed out what fine houses black people were living in. He simply did not see the bombed out church on the other side of the road.*

*I would visit in Montgomery the short time I was there, speak with a quiet woman in her ranch house living room who would tell me that she was reprimanded because she lost control in her class, but she said that when those boys from Michigan came in singing their freedom songs, she was crying. Her daughter, sitting unresponsive on the living room rug, had been kicked in the head by one of the horses in Sheriff Clark's posse.*

From *I Look Around for My Life*

# Upward Bound

- Established in 1965 under LBJ as part of the Office of Economic Opportunity (War on Poverty).
- Aimed to enhance higher education opportunities for the poor.
- Knoepfle served as a consultant to the program in its early days, assessing programs at Indian reservations, in the South and in South Side Chicago
- Along with other consultants, he was fired when the program was transferred (John called it “terminated”) to the Education Department under Nixon.

# Knoepfle on Upward Bound

*. . . I was a consultant for Upward Bound and visited projects on Indian reservations in South Dakota and Wisconsin, low-income communities in Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas, and the South Side of Chicago. This meant a great deal to me. It wasn't just the getting around to places I would never have known. It was meeting so many dedicated people and seeing the students respond to these new opportunities. It was a privilege to be part of that. . . .*

*When Upward Bound was terminated by the Nixon administration, I received a shabby mimeographed dismissal letter. But I still cherish the print with a quote from Tolstoy that the Washington office of Upward Bound sent its consultants:*

*'I sit on a man's back, choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am very, very sorry for him and wish to lighten his load by all possible means — except by getting off his back.'*



# East St. Louis

Coal sells a bushel a week  
at MacArthur Bridge.  
Time weighs men by the peck  
in the shacks there,  
and the January dark  
denies a summer delta.  
Ice grinds the winter  
river, a savage business.

*from Rivers Into Islands*

# Next Week

- A poet of place — *poems of the sangamon*.
- Knoepfle in his own voice — a recorded 1984 reading at Duff's Restaurant in St. Louis.
- Wrap-up.
  - Any favorite poems?
  - John Knoepfle seemed to believe that life itself is 'like silt/slow rivers encourage into islands.' Your comments.