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**The Poet Sylvester Pollet and his *Backwoods Broadsides*:**

**Samizdat Made in Maine**

Disertační práce

**Autor:** PhDr. Matthew Sweney, M.A.

**Vedoucí práce:** Prof. PhDr. Marcel Arbeit, Dr.

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Palacký University Philosophical Faculty  
Department of English and American Studies

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Samizdat Made in Maine**

Doctoral dissertation

**Candidate:** PhDr. Matthew Sweney, M.A.

**Dissertation Supervisor:** Prof. PhDr. Marcel Arbeit, Dr.

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto disertační práci na téma: „The Poet Sylvester Pollet and his *Backwoods Broadsides: Samizdat Made in Maine*“ vypracoval samostatně a uvedl jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

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Podpis .....

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## **Preface**

At the outset, it should be said that this is not a purely academic study. The subject is not ancient history opened for new debate, neither is it intentionally incomprehensible theoretical gobbledegook, nor a science-fiction discipline like economics. Nor is this a purely unbiased examination, for the subject of this study was not unknown to the author: he was a colleague, a friend, and a nice guy.

For, as Prof. Carroll F. Terrell of the University of Maine used to say, the subject of this study is Man and Poetry.

*Festina lente*

## 1. Introduction

This dissertation seeks to map the life, work, and influence of Jean Claude Sylvester Pollet (1939–2007). Sylvester Pollet was a poet, teacher and publisher who was born into the arts community in New York, but who left New York City for Maine in the early 1970s to “get away from it all.” As a poet, he wrote four small books of poetry over four decades; as a teacher, he helped generations of mostly low-income Maine students to read and write poetry; as an editor, he copy-edited the publications of the National Poetry Foundation, based at the University of Maine at Orono; and as a publisher he produced 100 issues of his “Maine samizdat” series called *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets*.

This represents the first in-depth critical look at Pollet’s life and work.<sup>1</sup> It will explain the background and origin of his poetic works in terms of personal biography, while introducing its thematic and philosophical underpinnings.

For Sylvester Pollet’s work, *place* was the defining factor. Thus I will begin with information on New York City’s Greenwich Village literary scene in the 1960s. The crucial turning point in his poetics and his life was his move to Maine in the 1970s.

I will devote a small chapter to the state (physical and philosophical) of Maine, explaining its appeal to writers, starting with Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862; author of *The Maine Woods*, 1864). Briefly, Maine is an American state the size of the Czech Republic, but with one-tenth the population. It is a place where one can afford space for contemplation, with a rural environment for work. Self-

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1. Parts of this dissertation, however, have already been published in my monograph *Básník Sylvester Pollet* (Prague: H&H, 2011).

reliance (as Ralph Emerson, Thoreau’s fellow Transcendentalist, might have said) is the key to survival there.

Pollet became a Buddhist, and so some connections to Buddhism in his poetry are explained, especially in terms of form. Later in life Pollet developed a poetic technique he called *kechik*, based on a Tibetan word meaning “instant”—as in a measure of time—which he discovered in the course of his study of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>2</sup>

Pollet lectured on poetry and creative writing at the University of Maine in Orono, and his poetry (especially *The Dandelion Sutras*) is marked by that experience. He also worked for the National Poetry Foundation, which is located in Orono. A brief description of that foundation and its mission is included. Pollet met many poets and critics through his work with the NPF, and his contact with them was the foundation of his publishing project, *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets*.

One such contact was the Czech poet Petr Mikeš (b. 1948) of Olomouc, who became a key figure in Pollet’s life. Mikeš introduced Pollet to the world of *samizdat* publishing. A brief description of *samizdat* and Pollet’s idea of American *samizdat*—or here more specifically, Maine *samizdat*—is provided.

Pollet published two *Chaplets* by Mikeš, the only poet who was published twice in his series. Contact with Petr Mikeš resulted in an invitation to read at the 2002 *Poetry without Borders* festival in Olomouc, where Pollet met with other Czech and European poets whom he later published in his *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets* series. Pollet was the subject of media attention, the result of which was that his works are best-known abroad in Czech translation. A complete

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2. “To be specific it’s the Kagyu lineage of the Vajrayana practice of Tibetan Buddhism. We have a Tibetan teacher, Thrangu Rinpoche, who comes to U.S. once a year to teach us. In 2005, Sylvester and I traveled to India and Nepal for teachings with him.” MaJo Keleshian, private correspondence (e-mail) with the author 1 February 2012.

bibliography of Pollet's works in Czech translation—as well as publications about Pollet in the Czech media—is included.

Lastly, his legacy includes what I think is one of the most remarkable American poetry publishing endeavors at the turn of the millennium—Pollet's *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets*. Because of their huge number, it is not in the scope of this work to do more than provide an overview of the series with a brief description and analysis. An in-depth discussion awaits another scholar, and perhaps needs a longer temporal interval for proper reflection and evaluation of their import. A complete annotated bibliography of the *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets* authors and titles is included as an Appendix. In my view, they represent an alternative model for poetry publishing opportunities in the new millennium.

## 2. The Man – Biography

Jean Claude Sylvester Pollet was born in Woodstock, New York, USA in 1939 to an artistic family—his father Joseph was a successful painter, graphic artist and advertising copywriter, his mother Betty was a sculptor, and his sister Elizabeth, seventeen years his elder, later became a successful writer, editor and translator. Woodstock, New York is a rural town some 175 km north of New York City, and has long been famous as an artistic community; the Pollets also spent time in New York City, in the Bohemian quarter of Manhattan known as Greenwich Village, where his father had a studio. Sylvester attended an exclusive Ivy League college, Dartmouth College (Class of 1961), where he won three writing awards, including the Academy of American Poets Prize. After his university studies he traveled the U.S., working odd jobs in the manner of Jack Kerouac, until settling in New York City, where his longest employment was at the legendary Eighth Street Bookshop in the East Village neighborhood of Manhattan. Although he was surrounded by poets at work and at home (his sister, Elizabeth Pollet (1922–2012), had not only written a best-selling autobiographical novel about her family<sup>3</sup>, but was also married to the poet Delmore Schwartz, and translated Isaac Bashevis Singer into English), for the most part he was either unable to get his poetry published, or chose not to do at this time. In 1971, he left with his partner, MaJo Keleshian, for Maine in order to get away from the city and “back to nature.” Maine’s famous coast also enabled him to pursue his passion for sailing, and time gained by being

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3. Elizabeth Pollet, *A Family Romance* (New York: New Directions, 1950).

away from the city was spent in the study of poetry and Buddhism. He built his own house on the side of a mountain and lived “off the grid,” using well water, wood for heating, and electricity powered by his own wind generator. In 1982, he published his first book of poetry, *Entering the Walking-Stick Business*, with a small, Maine independent press, in its own way *samizdat*—neither this, nor any of his following three collections of poetry have ISBNs (the same is true of his work as a publisher of other people’s poetry). As a teacher, he helped generations of mostly low-income Maine students to read and write poetry; as an editor, he copy-edited the publications of the National Poetry Foundation, based at the University of Maine at Orono. In 1994, he began publishing a series of chapbooks entitled *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets*, which grew to 100 in number by the time he ended the series in 2006, and arguably represents one of the finest series of contemporary American (as well as international) poetry at the turn of the millennium. One of the highlights of his life as a poet was his appearance at the 2002 *Poezie bez hranic* festival in Olomouc, where he met with Czech and international poets, some of whom he later published in the USA. After several years of treatment he died from a rare form of stomach cancer in 2007.



### 3. The Poet

#### 3.1 New York and *Street* (1970?—unpublished)

The dates of composition of the poems in *Street*, Pollet's first collection of poems, are unknown.<sup>4</sup> There are two dated poems, one in 1964 ("October 30, 1964") and one in 1970 ("8/11/70. . . a breeze")—a few poems may have been written slightly earlier, but likely none after 1970; in effect, the book represents a selection of poems preserved during the decade of the 1960s.

The poems in *Street* are not included in Pollet's Czech anthology,<sup>5</sup> and with good reason. These are journeyman poems, the work of a young man searching not only for a subject but also for a style. In addition, they do not reflect his reading of poetry. The poems are set in the streets of New York City—mostly in the area of Manhattan known as the East Village, where Pollet lived in those years. However, for completeness's sake, a few observations on poems from this collection are worth mentioning in terms of Pollet's future poetics. They obviously retained meaning for the poet himself, as he still maintained collated copies of the manuscript until he died, with notes on where he had subsequently placed individual poems in various small magazines.<sup>6</sup>

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4. Personal correspondence with MaJo Keleshian indicates it was collated in the 1980s from earlier pieces.

5. The monograph *Básník Sylvester Pollet* includes a selection of his poetry, translated into Czech by Petr Mikeš. See the Bibliography.

6. The *Street* manuscript is in the possession of Petr Mikeš, Olomouc poet and translator.

While the twenty-four poems in *Street* do not represent a vast poetic output, Pollet was busy in the 1960s working as a manager at the (legendary) Eighth Street Bookshop in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. The bookshop was a magnet for readers, writers, intellectuals of all sorts, and those interested in performance poetry. It was more than a bookshop; it was one of the focal points of the 1960s New York "scene" in the post-Beat, pre-Hippies era.

[T]he Eighth Street Bookshop rapidly became a literary gathering-spot reflecting and in turn influencing the latest local, national and international vogues in everything from poetry to astrophysics. [By the 1960s] Eighth Street would become as fine a book emporium as any in the U.S., and a worthy rival to Blackwell's in London.<sup>7</sup>

Ken Weaver of the Fugs worked there, as had LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka, later published by Pollet in his *Backwoods BroadSides Chaplet No. 31*), poet Peter Orlovsky and many, many more. Its owners, the Wilentz brothers, also founded Corinth/Totem Books, a small publishing house devoted mostly to poetry which became a major publisher of Beat Generation authors. The Eighth Street Bookshop's frequent clientèle included not only Beat Generation writers but also the literary lions of Greenwich Village such as E.E. Cummings, and the East

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7. Bill Reed, "Positively Eighth Street," [<http://realitystudio.org/bibliographic-bunker/positively-eighth-street/>]. Information on the Eighth Street Bookshop comes from this source and is echoed by anecdotal "common knowledge"—the author of this dissertation lived in Manhattan for seven years and frequented its bookshops.

Village, such as W.H. Auden. In addition, Pollet met his future wife—and partner in publishing—MaJo Keleshian, there.

After hours, Pollet was involved in the group of poets reading at Les Deux Mégots (“The Two Cigar Butts,” a pun on the more famous Les Deux Magots of Paris), and later at The Metro in Manhattan’s East Village (Little 25). The readings were mostly run by the poet Paul Blackburn (to whom Pollet also dedicated his book *Entering the Walking-Stick Business*, in memoriam) and while they only lasted for about two years, they spawned one anthology<sup>8</sup> and were influential in not only spoken poetry circles but also for contributing spoken poetry as an important element of the social milieu of the East Village—which it remains to this day. With cheaper rents (due to the lack of good public transportation and often a lack of hot running water) the East Village was *the* neighborhood for young and struggling artists and poets, including Allen Ginsberg, Ed Sanders and the Fugs, the home of St. Marks Church-in-the-Bowery and its Poetry Project, Bill Graham’s Fillmore East concert hall, etc.

Most of the poems of *Street* take place at street level, in the coffee shops, restaurants, bars. Some take place underground, (in the subway or underground bus station), one takes place overground when the poet sits in his flat for a day, looking down at the street. What does he see? Sparrows. What is missing there is a sense of the urgency of the street—one of the manifestos of the 1960s was

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8. Don Katzman and Robert Lima, Eds. *Seventh Street: Poems of ‘Les Deux Megots.’* (New York: Hesperidian Press, 1961).

“taking the revolution to the streets” and there is none of that here, no description of the fabled street life of the East Village in the 1960s with its protests and happenings.

Instead there are paeans to the beauty of waitresses, classical allusions to Greek or Roman gods. They don't fit: the book is not about them; New York is not Rome. [Although it was on the cusp of its fall in the 1970s, when the city went bankrupt, there is no analogy here about excess or pride or empire.]

To its credit there is an awareness of New York City not as a cityscape but as a place of streets situated at the ocean, which due to the modern buildings one can barely see—this is a view rare outside of Whitman—as here in the second stanza of Pollet's “Sleep is the Heavy Prow”

Landlocked in this tenement  
the door barred by sleeping bodies  
I still hear foghorns on the river,  
the shadow of my pen would  
track a gull's wake (*Street 9*)

Indeed the best poems in *Street* are those not about the street. The most successful poem is one set underground, at the “Port Authority Bus Terminal”: while standing in line for the bus the poet is so busy reading Pound's *Kung* cantos he misses the first call for seats on the bus and so has to stand during the whole 100 miles of the bus ride. It is an ironic metaphor which is indisputably true and

works both visually and philosophically, like the best zen *kōans*. And with double irony, as the young poet here is innocent (?) of his future role as an editor at the National Poetry Foundation in Orono, Maine—international headquarters of Ezra Pound scholarship.

In addition to that mention of Confucianism (by way of Pound), there is one more reference to Eastern philosophy, to Taoism, in the title of “brooklyn tao”. It describes attaining “a necessary stillness,” ending:

perhaps if I wait  
another gull will pass over  
taking the shortcut  
from the harbor to the sea (*Street 20*)

Why wait? This is not the American, and certainly not the Brooklyn, way. As the Beat writer John Clellon Holmes said, “GO!” Take that shortcut to the sea yourself!

The penultimate poem of the collection, “To My Lady Margaret” is about moving in with his love and how he is certain he is too rough, too medieval, to “fit in” with the neighbors, ending “Perhaps you should pack and come away with me.” (*Street 23*) This clearly prefigures their move to Maine... to the sea. The poet has found his proper muse, and realizes that they do not fit into the streets in which they live. It is time to leave. New York City has not been a fertile soil for his poetry—and no wonder: if he had not been constantly overwhelmed by the

looming figure of his painter-father Joseph Pollet, a Greenwich Village artist and living semi-legend (friend and foe to such painters as Edward Hopper and Jackson Pollock), as well as his older sister Elizabeth Pollet (a successful novelist, translator of Isaac Bashevis Singer into English, and wife of cult poet Delmore Schwartz), the internal pressure to make his own individual mark outside of their social spheres of influence could not have ever been far from his mind. In hindsight, *Street* can be seen as a prelude to his move to Maine and his mature works.

### 3.2 Dirigo: A few words about Maine

Let those talk of poverty and hard times who will in the towns and cities; cannot the emigrant who can pay his fare to New York or Boston pay five dollars more to get here—I paid three, all told, for my passage from Boston to Bangor, two hundred and fifty miles—and be as rich as he pleases, where land virtually costs nothing, and houses only the labor of the building, and he may begin life as Adam did?

—H.D. Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (Thoreau 27)

The closest approximation for Czech ears to the images brought up by the word “Maine” for Americans might be “Šumava.” Maine has an idyllic reputation for its unsullied nature, many people flock there in summer to visit, but year-round residents are few. Due to the rough conditions of living there, “Mainers” have a reputation as being both hard-headed and independent-minded. A few words about Maine need to be said to describe both its initial appeal to Pollet as one fleeing the streets of the city, and its subsequent bounties to him as a writer.

Maine is a small state in the USA, about the size of the Czech Republic, although with one-tenth the population, located in the extreme northeast—its border with

Canada is much longer than its border with the rest of the USA.<sup>9</sup> Its highest point is Mt. Katahdin, four meters higher than Snežka, and while it is slightly lower in latitude than the Czech Republic, due to its position it is colder (Arctic winds) and has more snow (proximity to the Atlantic Ocean) than the Czech Republic. One big geographical difference from the Czech Republic is its coast: its extremely jagged coastline runs for 400 km; looking at it another way and in other words (as poets do), it has 5600 km of “tidal coastline”—making it an ideal place for private beaches, avocational sailors, professional smugglers and bootleggers. Inland, the state is 90% forest, with huge areas uninhabited by humans.

Its own philosophy is embodied visually in the symbolism of The Great Seal of the State of Maine:



[image: DIRIGO.png]

Fig. 1. The Great Seal of the State of Maine.

Source: <http://www.maine.gov/sos/statseal.html>.

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9. I grew up in Maine, so the details are known to me. For corroboration of basic information on Maine, one can easily look up “Maine” at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maine> or [http://www.maine.gov/portal/facts\\_history/](http://www.maine.gov/portal/facts_history/).



The Great Seal of the State of Maine was adopted in 1820, when Maine separated from the state of Massachusetts and became a state in its own right. On the left is an old, bearded farmer resting on his scythe; on the right a youthful sailor, resting on his anchor. In the center there is a lone pine tree, set apart from the rest of the pines; a moose rests beneath the tree next to water. Above the central image is the motto “DIRIGO” and above the motto a star. It forms the central motif of the State of Maine flag, resting against a blue background representing the sea.

The star is meant to represent Polaris, the North Star, the fixed point in the swirling firmament. It is the mariner’s star, the primary means of dead reckoning. Thus the star and the motto “DIRIGO” go together, for the north star represents Maine’s position as both the northernmost and also the easternmost part of the original American colonies: the guide star by night and the site of the morning’s first light. In the words of the Act of 1820 defining the state motto of “DIRIGO”:  
“...as the Polar Star has been considered the mariner’s guide and director in conducting the ship over the pathless ocean to the desired haven, and as the center of magnetic attraction; as it has been figuratively used to denote the point, to which all affections turn, and as it is here intended to represent the State.”<sup>10</sup>

Maine’s “state nickname” is “The Pine Tree State,” reflected as well by the lone pine tree in its Great Seal, which was itself adapted from the symbol of the local

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10. See, for example: [<http://www.usafactbook.org/motto/maine/>].

Wabanaki Indian tribal federation, where the tree stood for independence.<sup>11</sup> The lone pine is solitary in the woods but not afraid, strong and secure, ruminating on a life lived in nature.

I've taken the time to describe the Great Seal of Maine because although it is a stylized emblem almost two centuries old it still reflects some truths about the land into which Sylvester Pollet arrived in 1971. Although sailors and farmers no longer represent the two main professions of its residents, they do still represent two major things that draw new residents to Maine: its rugged, scenic coast and relatively cheap land for sale in rural areas. Sailing was to become Pollet's avocation, and subsistence farming and self-sufficiency was exactly what he sought after life in New York City.

One could take the symbolism connected to Sylvester Pollet's life much further: he himself embodies both figures, though making a reverse transition—starting as the young farmer and resulting as the older bearded sailor. And it makes sense that a man named “Sylvester” would decide to live in Maine, the forest state.

Out of fifty US states, only three state are losing population, and Maine is one of them.<sup>12</sup> Few people move to Maine; Sylvester Pollet and his partner MaJo

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11. See Sidis, Chapter Six, for a discussion of the Penacook Federation and its relationship to the Wabanake Federation and its symbols.

12. See the *Portland (Maine) Press Herald*, 21 Dec 2011. Accessible at [<http://www.pressherald.com/news/Maine-among-3-states-to-lose-population-in-2011-.html>].

Keleshian were two of them. (The author of the essay you are reading is a Mainer who left that state to find work in the Czech Republic.)

Why move to a state without job prospects? One might ask where its new residents lived previously. There are many New Yorkers who have summer homes in Maine; it is a place to go when you want to leave “civilization” and “get away from it all.” As Pollet wrote in one of his poems (“Sestina for Terry Plunkett,” *Entering the Walking-Stick Business* 28) “In Maine there’s never any news/no looting, riots....”

It takes money to maintain a summer home in Maine; it takes cunning to live there year-round. Those not born there have to want to live “rough” and endure the cold winter. There is an inkling of his desire to get back to the basic idea of elemental living in one of the poems of *Street*:

#### The Renovation

I am tenement of  
a thousand clotheslines,

Gulliver splayed

garlic roach radios

usurp my ears

I would tear up my own  
linoleum  
cut and peel to the  
elements of structure  
pine boards and  
  
the good brick,  
things  
of the earth (*Street 18*)

Pollet was not alone in his exodus to Maine in the early 1970s. Cheap land and New England customs of privacy were ideal conditions for many who wanted to leave the turmoils of the 1960s and inner city riots behind, in addition to those avoiding military service in Vietnam and including hippies who wanted to start communes of love and peace in the woods. In Maine not far from where Pollet landed there are villages named Freedom, Liberty and Friendship, founded hundreds of years ago by similar-minded individuals. Henry David Thoreau's classic book about living simply in self-sufficiency, *Walden - A Life in the Woods* (1854), was a best-seller in the late 1960s. Less well-known is that Thoreau was a mountain climber and hiker: one of his other books is entitled *The Maine Woods* and it is a classic book on what we might now term wilderness ecology. A reader

of Thoreau, Pollet had a chance to put the philosophy Thoreau espoused into practice.

In Maine he had a chance to renovate not only buildings, but his entire self, and to build up from the foundations something of lasting value. His mental state is better, his poetics are better: the symbolic idea of the door is nicely “framed” here, in another poem from *Entering the Walking-Stick Business*:

JUNE 28, 1974, MAINE

Thirty-five years

for this—

to cut six mortises,

hang an old door

in a new shack.

Thirty-five more

to open it,

step out? (*Entering* 16)

It certainly did not take Pollet another thirty-five years to go through that door. The poems of the 1970s, which make up *Entering the Walking-Stick Business* (1982), his first Maine collection, show a sureness of step. Pollet used an epigram from William Blake to open the book, which begins: “Great things are done where Men & Mountains meet.” Blake was referring to the prophets; Pollet

is referring to his new home, land bought on Flying Moose Mountain (really). The view from Flying Moose Mountain is “sea, and hill, and wood” as Samuel Taylor Coleridge writes in “Frost at Midnight”—a poem partly about getting away from the city and moving to the countryside (first published in a quarto pamphlet similar in principle to Pollet’s *Backwoods Broadsides*). Great things would be done there: it had the necessary ingredients.

If we go back to the symbolism in the Great Seal of the State of Maine, the two figures are the farmer and the sailor. In the 1820 text describing the seal, the word “farmer” is not used; the figure is referred to as a “husbandman,” a now archaic word for farmer. The etymology of husbandman is the man who is attached to a house, and who tills the soil around the house, the house bound man. The two figures represent opposites: the fixed point and the moving horizon, roof vs. wind and rudder. The husbandman finds pride in his works, the sailor travels to new lands and meets new people, bringing back new spices and experiences.

The location of Flying Mouse Mountain made possible both opposites: a home with easy access to the sea. It lies equidistant to Penobscot Bay, Bangor and Bar Harbor, and in close proximity to them all. The coastal communities on Penobscot Bay such as Belfast, Castine, Ellsworth, as well as island communities such as Deer Isle, have been home to artists and writers for centuries. The Bangor-Old Town-Orono area is the home of the University of Maine and the National

Poetry Foundation and the headquarters of the Penobscot Indians.<sup>13</sup> Bar Harbor is the summer home of millionaires on Mt. Desert Island—the location of Acadia National Park, some of the most spectacular coastal scenery in North America. This is a “vortex” in the Poundian sense, a focus of energies fueled by nature, art and intellect. A place to start from.

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13. Hence the name “Old Town”—it was the yearly meeting place for the Penobscots. Indian Island, located on an island in the Penobscot River at Old Town, is the Penobscot Indian Reservation, the smallest Indian reservation in the United States.

### 3.3 *Entering the Walking-Stick Business* (1982)

As mentioned, *Entering the Walking-Stick Business*, the literary product of Sylvester Pollet's first decade in Maine, begins with an epigram by William Blake:

*Great things are done when Men & Mountains meet  
This is not done by Jostling in the Street.*

Wm. Blake, *Notebook, 1808-11*

Surely at the time it was meant as a comment by the author on his life, and his move to Maine, to the hills and open air. But the critic could also read it as a comment on Pollet's poetics: *Street* being the name of his previous, unpublished, collection of poems. The move to Maine was not only a great thing for Pollet's peace of mind, but also for his work: *Entering the Walking-Stick Business*, Pollet's first published collection, was put out by Blackberry Books, an imprint of the poet, bookseller and publisher Gary Lawless, Maine's Ferlinghetti.

The punning and private joke by Pollet on his first collection in the epigram is also repeated in the book's title. In the original, the phrase "Walking-Stick Business" has a jokey quality to it: surely, there can be no such profit in such a business. There is a paradox here, in that Maine is part of Puritan New England, and a great part of the Puritan philosophy is its emphasis on business and profit. But Maine is a place where there is widespread unemployment and thus few



opportunities for profit. Thus self-employment is an option, and making walking-sticks will certainly keep one occupied, if not profitably.

There is more: the walking-stick is the companion of the hiker. Thoreau again comes to mind, the image of the traveling writer and poet. There is a hidden reference to another such in the poet's biography written by publisher Gary Lawless at the end of the book:

He says he has failed to support himself adequately at any number of ventures, the present being hand-carving wooden puppets, hobby-horses, and walking-sticks. In 1981 he was awarded a diploma from The Bum's Academy, *honoris causa*. (*Entering* 49)

Lawless has explained that "The Bum's Academy" was a loose association of Maine poets in the 1970s,<sup>14</sup> which took its name from a phrase by the Japanese poet and translator Nanao Sakaki. Sakaki (b. 1924?) is a wandering poet, who after meeting poets Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg in Japan, was invited by them to the United States, where he has spent considerable time since the 1960s, including in Maine, where he met Lawless and other Maine poets.<sup>15</sup>

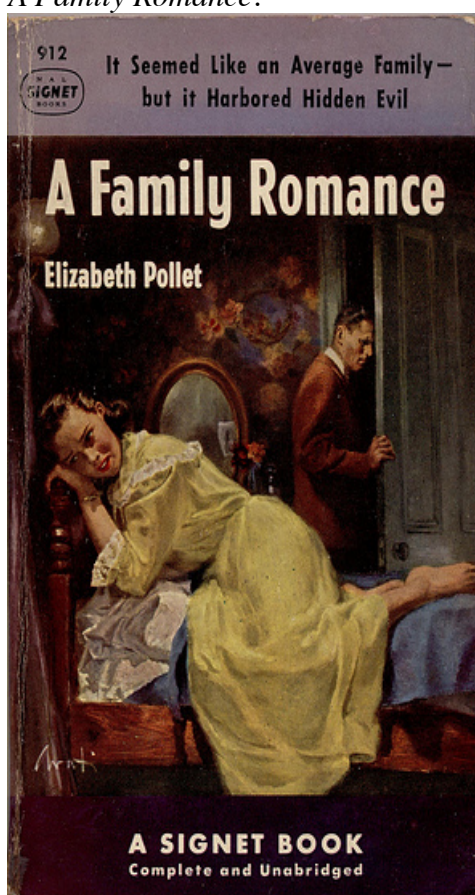
Thus the "Walking-Stick Business" is both literally a monetarily unprofitable occupation making sticks and the philosophically profitable

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14. Personal communication—e-mail to the author from Gary Lawless, 6 September 2011.

15. See *Break the Mirror. The Poems of Nanao Sakaki*. Foreword by Gary Snyder. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987). Lawless is also the publisher of Sakaki's *Let's Eat Stars* (Brunswick, Maine: Blackberry, 1997) and *Nanao or Never* (Brunswick, Maine: Blackberry, 2000).]

occupation of wandering and writing poetry. But again... there is more. In 1950, when Pollet was only eleven, his much older sister Elizabeth published her novel *A Family Romance*.



[image: familyromance.jpg]

Fig. 2. *A Family Romance*. Paperback reprint, 1952. Signet New American Library No. 912. Cover art by James Avati. Source: the author.

The novel is fiction, but the family described is the Pollets, barely disguised. The father is a composer, rather than a painter, but his work habits and their house in the country are described exactly. There are two older sisters and one much

younger brother, named “Paul” in the novel: read Sylvester. The novel ends with the unexpected death of young Paul, who takes his sick mother for a walk up a mountain. When she has difficulty walking, he tries to help her by making her a walking-stick, and accidentally falls off a cliff in the process. And so “Entering the Walking-Stick Business” is also a private joke and pun about committing “suicide”—making a career out of societal death. To leave New York to move to Maine, build a log cabin and write poetry, is to step off a cliff. Rebirth here, instead of death—although there are many poems here about death and mortality. The title of the book, “Entering the Walking-Stick Business”—and its contents—adds to the Puritan work ethic of hard work and austere living a Buddhist sensibility and a zen sense of humor with its characteristic inside joke of paradox (kōan) and last line turnaround (jakugo).

And so *Entering the Walking-Stick Business* is not merely a collection of 44 poems, but a well-composed whole, a personal testament on rebirth, relocation, aging and mortality. The timespan of the collection runs from April to March, while covering (and marking) the poet’s thirtieth, thirty-fifth and fortieth year, the birth of his children, the declining health and subsequent death of his father. It also includes a portrait of the author by his father, two “self-portraits”—one with snow—and a non-self-portrait.

The relocation to Maine allowed writing without distraction about himself, and this is pointed out in his poem “From Away” (the phrase is Maine-speak used to describe somebody who was not born in Maine):

(...)  
but it takes awhile  
to learn to cut wood  
as the neighbors do,  
not to see yourself;  
to plant the garden  
not for philosophy  
but because the soil is ready  
and it’s time. (*Entering* 7)

As for the composition, his two birthday poems on turning thirty and thirty-five are sandwiched by the poem “Only a Fool” about five lost years. His poem “Approaching a Mountain” (referring to both a real mountain, Flying Moose, and his nearing 40th birthday) is followed by “Epitaph”:

Epitaph  
  
Under this clay  
  
Sylvester Pollet (*Entering* 45)

The joke being the non-visual rhyme, the mix of English in the poetry and the French pronunciation of his surname. To read the poem is to learn to pronounce his name (undoubtedly often mispronounced) and in pronouncing his name, one breathes life into that clay, like God into Adam, bringing the poet back to life.

As mentioned, the timespan of the anthology allows for retrospection, not only for his own life, but also that of his father, who died during that timespan. The poem “For My Father, Nearing 80 in Room 706,” about his father in a senior home, is followed by the poem “Sunday Night’s Dream of Death,” a premonition of his father’s death. Later the poem “Letter to My Father,” written on his father’s “first birthday dead” is followed by the poem “The Gift,” an elegy describing what his father has left for him, not in terms of material possessions but in terms of teaching—in this case a painterly way of looking at the world. In a zen-like way “the gift” here is something left to his dead father, a visually impressive final resting place, a burial ground framed—by two birches in the foreground and a mountain in the background—as if it were a painting.

Elsewhere there are other references to painting, including an actual portrait of the author (when a boy) by his father, Joseph Pollet, not out of place in a book which features three poems called “self-portrait”: “Self Portrait,” “Self-Portrait with Snow” (Maine-inspired) and “Not Another Self-Portrait” (missing the “I”):



[image: *Portrait: Boy with Arrow*]

Fig. 3. Black and white reproduction of a color oil painting by Joseph Pollet, *Entering the Walking-Stick Business* 38. Source: Petr Mikeš.

The title poem of the anthology also finally refers to a painting:

Entering the  
walking-stick business-  
  
cutting saplings  
knee-deep in snow  
  
then in a book

the Sixth Patriarch

cutting a bamboo



[image: Huineng\_Cut\_Bamboo.jpg]

Fig. 4. “梁楷 六祖斫竹圖 The Sixth Patriarch (Hui Neng) Cutting Bamboo” by

Liang Kai (c. 1140 – c. 1210). Source: [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>]

The painting is not included in Pollet’s book but is reproduced here; again, there is internal punning: not only does that bamboo look like a walking-stick, and hence the Buddhist idea of making walking-sticks is proven by the Buddhist eternity that it has all been done before and will all be done again, but the Sixth Patriarch, Hui

Neng, is synonymous with the idea of *wu* or “Sudden Enlightenment”—of which I will write more when discussing Pollet’s book of *Kechiks*.

The poet’s rebirth in Maine is paralleled by his introduction of a Buddhist perspective into Puritan Maine, which makes for some of the best poems in the book, ones which can be appreciated by those who know nothing of Pollet’s biography, such as “July”:

July

not China,

not Japan

still,

out my window,

mist rises

from the mountain (*Walking* 26)

And my favorite:

Satori



after 68 Zen koan

I walked outside to piss—

hit my head on a tree limb

... Sudden Enlightenment indeed.

### 3.4 Entering the Literature Business

Coming back with satori  
but everything  
just as before;  
Hermit Mountain's  
drizzle and mist,  
Crooked River's waves.

—Classic zen poetry from *A Zen Forest* 92

If making and selling walking-sticks is not a profitable enterprise, then how can a Buddhist survive in the Maine capitalist climate? Pollet's answer has more zen than yen:

Right Livelihood  
  
40 years  
worked every which way  
still  
no sense of it  
quit looking and

it came to me—  
for kids—carve horses—  
so simple—  
white pine,  
a sharp knife,  
follow the grain. (*Entering 42*)

Unfortunately the addition of carving wooden horses was not enough of a livelihood either. Pollet likely had an inheritance or some family money (managing a bookstore in New York City is not a well-paid job) which paid for the property in Maine and kept him going in the 1970s but which eventually ran out.

### 3.4.1 Teaching

In the 1980s he sought employment. Enter the vortex. The biggest employer in the area Pollet settled in is the University of Maine, with its main campus in Orono.

While Pollet had won writing prizes at his university, he did not have an advanced degree or teaching qualifications, so he was not eligible for a standard teaching position at the university. However, at most American universities, including the University of Maine, every first-year student is required to take a course entitled English Composition, a course which prepares students for academic writing.

There is typically a greater demand for instructors for this course than there is supply. Due to this demand, Pollet was able to teach a few classes as an external lecturer, and as a published poet he was qualified to teach optional courses in creative writing-poetry, such as “Introduction to Creative Writing” and “Writing Poetry”.<sup>16</sup>

One can explain the above poem “Right Livelihood” in terms of teaching writing, as well. “For kids” = for students; “white pine” = the Maine state tree, the local raw materials at hand; “a sharp knife” = the writing teacher’s red pen; “follow the grain” = a William Carlos Williams-esque admonition to follow the pure line, and the pure subject of what you know. In the words of his friend and colleague Naomi Jacobs, “[h]e nurtured hundreds of student writers over the years” (Jacobs 23).

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16. See [<http://english.umaine.edu/faculty/sylvester-pollet/>].

Work tends to rub off on one—some of the poems in his *Dandelion Sutras* reflect the job, as we will see. While a regular, part-time member of the English Department faculty at the University of Maine at Orono since the 1980s, Pollet never completed the further degrees which would have qualified him to work as a full-time instructor. He insisted on keeping his distance. As MaJo Keleshian says:

Sylvester was always a *part-timer* and stuck to it! He enjoyed teaching, editing, and his colleagues, but intentionally stayed out of administrative hassles as much as possible. His part-time status enabled him to do that. He needed time to cut the firewood, do carpentry, write, read, publish, meditate, travel, live.<sup>17</sup>

Poverty is your treasure. Do not exchange it for an easy life.

—“Suggestions for Zen Students” by Zengetsu

(Senzaki and McCandless 70)

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17. E-mail correspondence with the author, 1 February 2012. And from the description, SP... obviously a genius.

### 3.4.2 The National Poetry Foundation

There was, however, more work available for a competent proofreader. Enter deeper into the vortex.

The University of Maine at Orono is also the headquarters of the National Poetry Foundation, founded in 1971 by Prof. Carroll F. Terrell (1917–2003) of the University of Maine.<sup>18</sup> Terrell was the editor and major author of *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (University of California at Berkeley Press, 1980), and Terrell started the NPF as a research and publication center, initially to promote Ezra Pound scholarship. As a clearinghouse for the research which led up to his *Companion to the Cantos*, Terrell launched the quarterly academic journal *Paideuma* on Ezra Pound studies in 1972, and in 1982 he founded the quarterly academic journal *Sagetrieb* on studies in American poetic modernism.<sup>19</sup> While editorial duties were given to established professors, in reality much of the work (copy-editing and proofreading) was eventually given to Pollet, as he had both the time and the talent for it. Prof. Burton Hatlen (1937–2008), director of the NPF after Terrell retired, called Pollet “a demon proofreader”.<sup>20</sup>

Working at the university with students on their writing, especially their creative writing and poetry, forced the poet Pollet to pay attention to words and get paid for it. It is a paradoxical position for a writer to spend his or her time on

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18. And author of *Vzpomínky na indiánskou řeku* (Praha: Knižní klub, 2002). Translated by (who else?) Petr Mikeš.

19. See [<http://www.nationalpoetryfoundation.org/>].

20. Personal conversation with the author, 1994.

other people's writing, but it is an established paradoxical monetary tradition. It pays the bills, although it is personally unfulfilling. This does not mean that it is uninspiring; the drudgery of working on the writing of non-writers inspired a project by Sylvester Pollet which he carried out almost until his death.

### 3.4.3 *Backwoods Broadsides*

If you believe this world is created by a supreme being, then you must feel powerless to change it, thus leaving your fate to the mercy of the creator. Buddhists know that the world is your own production. You may change it, rebuild it, or improve it to suit your own will.

—from “Ten Questions,” in Senzaki 5

Starting in 1978, Pollet decided to change, rebuild and improve his world, occasionally publishing a poetry series in non-traditional formats—bookmarks, etc.—which he called “Backwoods Broadsides”. The idea was to use poetry to stir people’s reflections, much as political pamphlets are meant to stir people’s reactions.

In reaction to his work with students, here he was working with and publishing real writers—seasoned poets. The first Backwoods Broadsides authors were Maine poets, fellow members and honorary members of The Bum’s Academy. But while his own poetry output almost evaporated in the 1980s,<sup>21</sup> Pollet’s horizons started to expand, due to his involvement with the National Poetry Foundation and the expanding vision of its founder, Carroll Terrell. In order to raise operating capital for the National Poetry Foundation, Prof. Terrell

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21. “I have always heard that Maine people are rather taciturn....” John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley. In Search of America*. (New York: Viking, 1962. Rptd. 1963. New York: Bantam Books) 50.



inaugurated a series of summer poetry and poetics conferences, which due to the Maine locale in summer, attracted active international participation. The first, in 1975, was devoted to Ezra Pound, followed by two more on Pound in 1980 and 1985. Their popularity (the Pound conferences started by Prof. Terrell are now held annually at various locales internationally, with an Ezra Pound studies center (The Ezra Pound Centre for Literature) located at Pound's former residence at Brunnenburg castle) and accompanying profit allowed Terrell to expand upon the idea, with conferences on William Carlos Williams (1983), H.D. (Hilda Dolittle, 1986), Marianne Moore (1987), T.S. Eliot (1988), and Ezra Pound & W.B. Yeats (1990). In 1992 Burton Hatlen succeeded Terrell at the NPF, and launched the "decades" conferences, dedicated to the generations of poets who were affiliated with certain decades. The first was the Poets of the 1930s (1993), followed by Poets of the 1950s (1996), the 1960s (2000), and the 1940s (2004). Pollet was partly involved in all of them, and thus had the good fortune to correspond and meet personally with some of the top literary critics on American poetry in the world, as well as to meet the poets themselves.

Hard work on the conferences paid off in the sense that Pollet gradually acquired the ideal mailing list for a small publisher of poetry: poets and critics. Although residing on a mountain in Maine, he was now at the center of a vortex of poetry in the United States. And far from escaping society, he and his wife

MaJo had now integrated themselves into a society of intellectuals, book readers, fine arts lovers.<sup>22</sup>

Now that Pollet had a list of potential subscribers, all he needed was a format. During the 1980s he imagined several kinds of formats, including the possibility of launching an “American samizdat” endeavor after meeting Petr Mikeš in 1990 at the National Poetry Foundation. Mikeš gave a public talk on samizdat publishing and while Pollet had heard of the phenomenon, this was the first time he had seen actual typewritten copies. The various formats and “homemade” style of the books intrigued him, as did the idea of the samizdat community.<sup>23</sup>

A samizdat journal, more than a normally published one, argues a close relationship between contributor and reader, though this by no means implies an identity of outlook. Who is going to take the trouble to copy out long typescripts, and who is going to take the risks involved, if they do not share a basic concern with the issues under discussion?

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22. Bangor, the largest city near to Orono, has an opera, theatre and a symphony orchestra. The Maine Center for the Arts (now Collins Center for the Arts, located on the Orono campus about 50 meters away from Pollet’s former school office) offers some 50 concerts and dance performances a year, as well as housing the Hudson Ethnographic Museum.

23. The author was present at this talk, and spoke with both Mikeš and Pollet afterwards. In retrospect, this was certainly a “vortex” in the Poundian sense, with implications for decades to come.

Medvedev, “Publisher’s Note” v.

He toyed with the idea of doing something similar to the *Texty přátel*<sup>24</sup> samizdat editions Mikeš was a part of, but decided instead on small “vest pocket” books.<sup>25</sup>

The problem with the vest pocket format is that it is wasteful in terms of paper—most of the paper is excised and goes into the bin, so that while such books are small, they are not inexpensive. Pollet eventually decided to keep the size but to dispense with the binding.

In 1994, Pollet started his “Backwoods Broadside Chaplet Series”—one standard sheet of “US Legal” sized paper [= 8.5 x 14 inches; or, 215.9 x 355.6 mm] folded with three creases to make 8 equal-sized panels, four on each side, arranged along the long axis of the paper. For poetry it is an ideal format, as it allows several short poems or one long poem. It is a “vest pocket” dimension and is not wasteful or expensive, as it is one piece of standard-sized paper, uncut. The title is another of Pollet’s puns: a chapbook-booklet or chaplet—and in English “chaplet” is a garland. Poets were paid in copies, and the paper used was heavy paper remnants from other jobs done at a local printing company,<sup>26</sup> so the physical costs were almost zero—the main costs would come in postage, but even that was

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24. Copies of *Texty přátel* are on deposit at the samizdat library Libri prohibiti, Senovážné nám. 2, Prague.

25. Personal conversation with Naomi Jacobs, 1996. At that time, Jacobs was on holiday in Rome, and Pollet asked her to buy some copies of the Italian pocket-sized books of poetry of which he had heard tell.

26. Initially he printed 300 copies—less than a ream of paper; later he was printing as many as 750 copies, which is still less than two reams of paper.

a small fee as each “chaplet” was literally one piece of paper which would fit into a standard American “business-size” envelope.

### 3.4.4 *The Dandelion Sutras* (1994)

**BACKWOODS BROADSIDES**, est. 1978 in Ellsworth, Maine, has published 18 items in a variety of formats. Thanks to Martha and Basil King of Brooklyn NY for permission to use this one, borrowed from their series *Northern Lights International Poetry/Brooklyn Series*, a format they borrowed from Michael Carlson of *Northern Lights*, London. Thanks also to the editors of *The Dandelion Review*, *Chants*, and *Light*, in which some of these poems appeared.

This is the first of the **BACKWOODS BROADSIDES CHAPLET SERIES**. To subscribe send \$10 yr, 8 issues ppd.

**BACKWOODS BROADSIDES**  
**Sylvester Pollet**  
**RR 5 Box 3630**  
**Ellsworth ME 04605-9529**

**THE DANDELION SUTRAS** ∞ An edition of 300 copies, +  
of which this is number 613

[image: TheDandelionSutras.png]

Fig. 5. *The Dandelion Sutras*. Backwoods BroadSides Chaplet #1 in extra printings. Source: the author.

Pollet's format was not original, but he acknowledged the source. And while he selected his own work for first publication (as did Ferlinghetti at City Lights), his *The Dandelion Sutras* was the most popular of the editions he published, selling well beyond the original printing, most likely not for its own poetics but for the fact that people who knew Sylvester via the National Poetry Foundation wanted to read his new work and support his new project.

The ten poems reflect the stifled academic writing atmosphere he had gotten himself into: there are no satori here, no sudden flashes of enlightenment; instead one finds more lengthy “essays” on words. “Dandelion Sutra #1” starts with a revision of a quote from Pound’s *ABC of Reading*, “Make It New,” and ends invoking Whitman. It reads like a poetic meditation on an introductory lesson for a creative writing class. And could this poem have been written by anyone who hasn’t labored over students’ academic writing papers?

**Dandelion Sutra #2: Syntax is Power**

Continuing that thought,  
is it not then possible  
that we may well have come  
to the point at which  
we must recognize that  
there can no longer be  
in any meaningful sense  
a significant distinction made  
between word and deed—  
that in fact words are deeds—  
and furthermore that the deed  
of the periodic sentence,  
that latinate model of  
overbred understatement,

may be, ultimately, to make you  
stand in line and wait  
for whatever you continue to hope  
it may contain?

or the following:

**Dandelion Sutra #4**

This is not  
a poem about  
dandelions, nor  
sutras,  
but about  
language  
and about  
how  
when we use it  
there's no way  
we can deny  
being about  
something  
without being about  
just that—

like a spring lawn  
foolishly protesting  
it is anything  
but a green  
dropcloth  
for the  
dandelion paint  
of the sun

One feel the academic prose fighting the poetry, that the lessons taught in the  
Academic Writing Center are not Buddhist, they are not about “writing center:”

### **Dandelion Sutra #10**

rock-pile in  
summer sun  
each  
with its own  
weight  
clump and burst  
of tiger lilies,  
fire



(that orange fire)  
against green clover  
cover-crop  
  
no logic  
words in series  
rough groupings  
not logic  
only they are  
there the  
rocks once  
placed there  
and will stay

Why the dandelion? Surely it is an homage to Allen Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra" (1955) but to a much "lowlier" plant. The dandelion is a root, a weed that cannot be eradicated. It will stay despite human intervention and that is its lesson: the biological needs no logic; it just is. *Biologos*.

The reasons for Pollet's poetic silence in the decade after the publication of *Entering the Walking-Stick Business* are unknown, but can be easily surmised. The son became the father. Making money to raise his two children, keeping them away from Moloch, and spending time with them (Pollet's artist father had an infamous rule that the children were not allowed to see him until noon, after he

was finished with his morning painting)<sup>27</sup> would be obvious reasons. And with fatherhood, a shift in thought from the private to the public, an end of introspection and in its place a devotion to going good works for others. The *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets* series would ultimately be 100 in number, continuing until 2006, and featuring the writing of many of the foremost living American poets, as well as non-American poets in translation. In its small way it became a major contribution to poetry publication in the USA.

As for Backwoods Broadsides, I started publishing under that name in 1978, when I did a poem of mine to hand out at the Maine Poets Festival. But the idea for getting poetry out that way really came from New York in the 1960s, when I was working in the 8th St. Bookshop, reading in the Metro and Deux Mégots series, and seeing poetry change hands in every imaginable form, usually for free.

Over the years, I've used any number of formats, from postcards to Möbius strips to a set of bookmark poems by ten writers, distributed free in libraries and bookshops. This Chaplet Series, begun in 1994, has been quite a ride. The response, particularly from poets, internationally, has been extraordinary. Without that, I'd never have continued so long; with it, I decided to see if I could make it all the way to Number 100. Done!

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27. Obviously, a genius.

—Sylvester Pollet, Afterword to Backwoods Broadsides Chaplet

#100, *Songs of Farewell* by Jonathan Greene

### 3.5 *First Will and Testament of Sylvester Pollet (1999)*

† pollet, *n.*2 [†: Obs.]

Perh.: a part of a church bell.

[*Oxford English Dictionary* on-line]<sup>28</sup>

*First Will and Testament of Sylvester Pollet* (1999) was published in a limited, illustrated bibliophile edition at a small Maine press. It is made up of five parts, the first dedicated to his daughter Noelle “to swim;” the second to his son Matthew “to fly;” the third to his wife MaJo “to sail on;” the fourth to the ocean, and the fifth to himself. Given the title, the poet expects his immediate family to outlive him; the fifth and last part gives them instructions as to where to deliver his ashes. Perhaps in some way Pollet had already felt the first stirrings of the cancer which would eventually kill him, that he could already hear those bells ringing for him.

Time for the poet to write a will, and so why not write a poetic will? The book is printed on fine paper, as if parchment, but the text of this “first will” bequeathes his family no material things, befitting the Buddhist distrust of possessions. Nevertheless, the book itself is a material thing, limited to one hundred copies. The duplication of the will itself as a book gives it a materiality which is meant to be hoarded, to last. It is perhaps the product of a lesson learned from what happened to his father, Joseph Pollet, considered a significant

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28. See [<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/267640?rkey=jdkoH3&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>].

American painter. In 1973, a fire broke out at the warehouse containing all his unsold paintings—a lifetime of work—destroying them all. A lesson on the impermanence of things and a tragedy for the family—both in terms of preserving Joseph Pollet’s reputation and also as possible future financial inheritance. When Pollet included a poor reproduction of a portrait his father painted of Sylvester when a boy in *Entering the Walking-Stick Business*—he was doing it to ensure that at least that portrait has survived and will continue to do so via its publication.

#### **THE GATHA OF IMPERMANENCE**

All composite things are impermanent,

They are subject to birth and death;

Put an end to birth and death,

And there is a blissful tranquility.

—Suzuki 4

Publication achieves a sort of temporary permanence. The subject matter of the poem, what to do after death, includes instructions for where to put his ashes at sea. The course is described exactly, including which side of the buoys the ship should travel on the journey there and back. *Dirigo—I will guide*. The buoys are fitted with bells to warn sailors of approaching hazards, and if a walking-stick is a rudder for navigating the mountains and woods, the *First Will and Testament of*

*Sylvester Pollet* will guide his successors through the necessary channels. Life itself is but a passage.

5. (For me)

When it's time —

don't rush me, but when it's time

burn me down, sail me from Castine

past Nautilus, past Holbrook, Cape Rosier

to the Green Ledge Bell.

Starboard tack would be nice

the dead deserve the right of way

so keep the bell to westward

start the sprinkling.

I'll warn you, it's light and flaky stuff

like ground up shells.

Say breeze is S/SW, the

afternoon sea breeze,

some flakes may stick to the boot stripe,

the bottom paint — don't worry

they'll wash off on the other tack.

Come about, round the bell, watch the jibe;

sprinkle the rest downwind &

head on back to Dennett's Wharf for beer.

I'll be fine — hang out with  
my buddies the seals  
eat sushi, with finally the time  
to finish Proust in French,  
study the Kelp Sutra in the original,  
listen to the bell

Part four of the poem, dedicated to the sea, describes the sea floor, Pollet's final resting place, and the living creatures who will be there with him, the "crabs, bloodworms, barnacles, diatoms / all sentient beings," and who will be chanting a Buddhist prayer, the *Om Mani Padme Hum* together. In the Buddhist tradition, with prayer go bells.

#### **PRAYER OF THE BELL**

Would that the sound of the bell might go beyond our earth,  
And be heard even by all the denizens of the darkness outside the Iron  
Mountains (cakravala) !

Would that, their organ of hearing becoming pure, beings might attain  
perfect interfusion [of all the senses],

So that every one of them might come finally to the realization of  
supreme enlightenment!

It is customary in the Zen monastery to recite the Kwannon while striking the big bell, which is done three times a day. The present gatha is recited when the striking is finished. As will be seen below, from Kwannon issues a sound which is heard by those who sincerely believe in his power of releasing them from every form of disaster. Each sound emitted by the bell is the voice of Kwannon calling on us to purify our sense of hearing, whereby a spiritual experience called “interfusion” will finally take place in us. (Suzuki 7)



### 3.6 *Kechiks. Great Spruce Head Island (2002)*

The word *kechik* is not in common parlance.

Great Spruce Head Island is not accessible to the public.

Pollet's last book, *Kechiks. Great Spruce Head Island*, was never available for sale nor distribution in the USA.

So what is going on here?

Pollet defines *kechik* at the beginning of the book with a quote from Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's *Dharma Paths*: *kechik* is "the Tibetan word for a very short instant."

Great Spruce Head Island is an island in Penobscot Bay, not far from Pollet's home. Its contours were well-known to Pollet as a sailor, but it is privately owned, inaccessible without an invitation from the Porter family, which spends every summer on their island. Its most distinguished members were photographer Eliot Porter (1901–1990)<sup>29</sup> and his brother, the painter Fairfield Porter (1907–1975);<sup>30</sup> their work has made the island world famous as a place of natural beauty.

Anina Porter Fuller, their niece and an established painter in her own right, still spends summers on the island and runs an annual Art Week,<sup>31</sup> when she opens the island once a year to only twelve artists, who are invited to spend that week

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29. See [<http://www.cartermuseum.org/collections/porter/about.php>], including a collection of his Great Spruce Head Island photos.

30. See [<http://www.parrishart.org/parrish.asp?id=130>].

31. See [<http://aninapfuller.com/artweek.html>].

staying in the Porter family home to work on an artistic project. In June 2002, Sylvester Pollet and his wife MaJo Kaleshian were selected to take part in her Art Week.

16

Summer Island

imagine, photographing

Eliot Porter's stone

Pollet wanted to make the most of his week on the island, exploring it to the fullest, making as many observations (notes and photographs) as possible, as this was a rare opportunity, most likely never to be repeated in his lifetime. A treasured coincidence was that the week included the date of his sixty-third birthday. Why not make poetic notes?

Pollet's *kechiks* are poetic snapshots, not photographic ones—akin to the “snaps” or “pops” Jack Kerouac called his American version of haiku:

The American Haiku is not exactly the Japanese Haiku. The Japanese Haiku is strictly disciplined to seventeen syllables but since the language structure is different I don't think American Haikus (short three-line poems intended to be completely packed with Void of Whole) should worry about syllables because American speech is something again...bursting to pop.

Above all, a Haiku must be very simple and free of all poetic trickery

and make a little picture and yet be as airy and graceful as a Vivaldi  
Pastorella.” (Quoted in Weinberg, 85)

An example from Kerouac:

The dog yawned  
and almost swallowed  
My Dharma (quoted in Burgan, 51)

Three short lines, with the jakugo in the last line. Kerouac called the jakugo  
turnaround “satori”—Japanese for awakening, an instant enlightenment. The  
“sudden enlightenment” of the Sixth Patriarch. Or in the English tradition, what  
William Wordsworth in *The Prelude* called “spots of time,”

There are in our existence spots of time,  
That with distinct pre-eminence retain  
A renovating virtue, whence—depressed  
By false opinion and contentious thought,  
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,  
In trivial occupations, and the round  
Of ordinary intercourse—our minds  
Are nourished and invisibly repaired

Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 12.208–215 (1805 edition)

what James Joyce called “epiphany,” or what Allen Ginsberg called an  
“illumination.”

The first of Pollet's *kechiks* records his aim:

1  
Great Spruce Head  
6 miles offshore  
Buddha goes too

This is both Pollet taking a representation of the Buddha along with him to accompany him for religious reasons, and jokingly inviting the Buddha to visit Great Spruce Head Island with him on this unique occasion, as well as a metaphoric meaning—that Pollet is going to the island for meditation purposes, too.

*Kechik* number two records his first impression

2  
stone horse  
skull spruce  
sea cliff

There are sixty *kechiks*, “instant” images, captured in all, and over the course of the sixty *kechiks* and the week spent on the island, some themes emerge. One of them is impermanence:

23  
stone horse  
I came back to take your picture

but you're gone

He returns to the stone horse, but there is no return, the light has changed, the horse is gone. Even a stone horse can move. For sentient beings there is a spiritual aspect to impermanence—transcendence:

21

what were you—

baby seal?

dead now

He doesn't recognize the remains on the beach (baby seal?), they have metamorphosed into something unrecognizable...but wait...

22

baby seal

here's more spine and your head

10 million pebble gravestones

Further on there are more remains, enough to recognize the origins, definitely once a baby seal, but its one head and spine stand in for the millions which have passed before on this beach, turning to stone.

4

drifts of mussel shells

each two

a life lost

5

driftwood stump

beach pea blossoms climbing you

you were alive once

Of course (as we know from Buddhism and particle physics) what is observed is influenced by the observer.

42

I saw 3 islands in a bay

Edna St. Vincent and

Pollet

Like the two in *Entering the Walking-Stick Business*, this is another poem that tells the reader how to pronounce his name, but it also describes what he sees: “three islands in a bay” — which is also a direct quotation from Maine poet Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950),<sup>32</sup> from “Renascence” (1912) which starts:

All I could see from where I stood

Was three long mountains and a wood;

I turned and looked the other way,

And saw three islands in a bay.

So with my eyes I traced the line

Of the horizon, thin and fine,

---

32. Millay’s poem “The Murder of Lidice” was published in the *New York Times* and *Life* magazine in 1942.

Straight around till I was come  
Back to where I'd started from;  
And all I saw from where I stood  
Was three long mountains and a wood.  
Over these things I could not see:  
These were the things that bounded me;  
And I could touch them with my hand,  
Almost, I thought, from where I stand.  
And all at once things seemed so small  
My breath came short, and scarce at all.  
But, sure, the sky is big, I said;  
Miles and miles above my head;  
So here upon my back I'll lie  
And look my fill into the sky.

Again Pollet's shorthand notation stands for multiple meanings. He is describing 1) the shock of recognition that he is seeing the same three islands Millay saw; 2) the shared perspective: thanks to her poem he is seeing them as she did, sharing that transcendental experience of the shifting of space and horizon; 3) by rhyming "Millay" and "Pollet" he is equating them, not on a qualitative level as being equally good poets, but on a subjective level—that the poetic line from Millay to Pollet exists and will continue afterwards: there will be another poet after Pollet

looking at those islands and having a transcendental experience. Past and present and future, as in Buddhist philosophy.

In terms of past, present and future, Pollet marks his sixty-third birthday spent on the island:

51

mirror, first light

so that's what 63 looks like

no different

59

this birth-

day 15 minutes left

it goes by that fast

Sixty *kechiks* make one minute, sixty *kechiks* are all that is left of one week on the island, it goes by that fast.

45

Fish Hawk Point

calm down, osprey,

I'll soon be gone

Pollet refers not only to himself standing there, soon to leave that spot and leave the island, but also to his *First Will and Testament*, where he compares the osprey,



or fish hawk, to his son and to his wife. For a man suffering with cancer, “I’ll soon be gone” has another meaning. The final *kechik*, an instant commemorating Buddha’s dying words:

60

don’t grieve, strive with diligence —

all compounded things decay.

Buddha’s last words

(28.6.2002)

Pollet dedicated *Kechiks. Great Spruce Head Island* “to all sentient beings in limitless space, and to Philip Whalen, beat poet, Zen monk, who died on June 26, 2002, though I didn’t know that until I came off the island.” Being on the island, playing attention to the details of its small, but infinite, world, means not hearing the sounds of the larger world, but its important echoes are eventually heard. The book ends with the passing of the Buddha but life passage do not end, they continue. The death of American zen monk and poet Philip Whalen is a kind of coincidence, as Pollet’s book is rather Whalen-like in its philosophy and scale. What did Pollet do with his *kechiks* once he got off the island?

*Kechiky. Great Spruce Head Island* is also full of puns. Puns, linguistic jokes, are windows which let light into both the reality that language is artificial, human-made, and also that our artificial symbolic systems can also describe truth by accident.

43

what's a perfect  
sand dollar worth  
in euros?

A “sand dollar” is the skeleton of an echinoid, which when its spines fall off and bleached in the sun, resembles the old silver dollars. A perfect such skeleton can have some value as a decoration, and they are occasionally sold in shops. But Pollet is clearly thinking toward his coming visit to Europe and the euro, its new currency. Shells (conches, wampum) have been used for currency at various times in history. What would be the rate of exchange? (This *kechik* has added insight today, when the euro itself is threatened.)

**Backwoods Broadsides Private Edition**

On the occasion of the Second International Poetry Festival  
*Poezie bez hranic* “Poetry Without Borders,”  
October 9-13, 2002, Olomouc, Czech Republic

Copyright © 2002 Sylvester Pollet  
Backwoods Broadsides  
963 Winkumpaugh Road  
Ellsworth, Maine 04605 USA



[image: BBPrivate.png]

Figure 6. Kechiks. Great Spruce Head Island colophon. Source: the author.

*Kechiks. Great Spruce Head Island*, a book in English, was only distributed in the Czech Republic, at a poetry festival in Olomouc, in October 2002. This “private edition,” with its hand-sewn binding, was passed out by the

author into individuals' hands. It has a samizdat feel, and it is as if Pollet were returning something gained back to its source. One should remember that four of the one hundred Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets Pollet published in his series were translated from Czech (Petr Mikeš has two, also one by Bronislava Volková and one by Martin Reiner)—more than from any other language.

Pollet brought his last book to those attending a poetry festival in the Czech Republic. What else did he bring? A new word into the Czech language—*kečik*—and old news about the sea... from a closed island off the coast of Maine to a landlocked island in Europe. Pollet, like Nanao Sakaki, has become the wandering poet, the travelling zen missionary.

It takes a half a lifetime to see what is happening in an instant and another half to capture it in words. You have to know the stars and the landmarks on the shore to navigate. *Dirigo*: you hold the rudder, but the wind blows, the sea carries you to new places.

My monograph on Sylvester Pollet also included the full text of *Kechiks*, translated into Czech by Petr Mikeš. New places:

Mainská univerzita – kde byl Pollet zaměstnán – nevlastní ani jeden výtisk *Kečiků*.

Knihovna Kongresu – kde by měl ze zákona být výtisk každé knihy publikované na území Spojených států – rovněž nevlastní jediný výtisk *Kečiků*.

Vy – kdo čtete tuto knihu – ovšem *Kečiky* máte.

Jaká je vlastně recepce Polletova díla?

Právě ji držíte v rukou. (Sweeney 64–65)

[The University of Maine—where Pollet worked—does not have a copy of *Kechiks. Great Spruce Head Island*.

The Library of Congress—where by law a copy of every published book in the USA has to be sent—does not have it.

You—who are reading this book—have it.

What is the reception of Pollet's work?

You are holding it in your hands.]

*Who knows? This*

*clear, shallow stream*

*Runs at last*

*to the blue depths of the sea.*

— classic zen poem as translated by Shigematsu 76

### 3.7 The Czech Reception

Is Sylvester Pollet an obscure poet?

Not in the Maine context—he was part of an unofficial group in the nineteen-seventies and -eighties, “The Bums’ Academy,” whose works were published privately and available at independent Maine bookstores. His quarter-century as the Creative Writing - Poetry teacher at the main campus of the University of Maine certainly made him well-known to the younger generation of poets. And his publishing operation, *Backwoods Broadsides*, favored Maine poets and translators. In addition, he was an almost permanent figure at Maine poetry festivals.

Nor, I would argue, is he an obscure poet in the Czech context [and I hope this dissertation will add to his recognition in this country as well as in the USA]. The first “official” (i.e., with an ISBN) publication of Pollet’s poetry was in a Czech anthology of New England poetry, *Vítr z Narrangansettu* [Prague: Fra, 2002. Selected and translated by Petr Mikeš, with an introduction by myself]. Thanks to the untiring efforts of poet and translator Petr Mikeš (see Bibliography), Pollet’s work has been perhaps made more available to Czech readers than to American readers—certainly in terms of the number of bookshops, and on-line book sellers where his work can be found.

*Vítr z Narrangansettu* [“Wind from Narraganett”] was published just after Pollet’s arrival in the Czech Republic, where he was an invited guest at the 2002

Poetry Without Borders festival in Olomouc (October 9–13, 2002). The book contains several poems from *Entering the Walking-Stick Business* (see Bibliography), and several poems which Petr Mikeš obtained in manuscript from Pollet. These three poems—“After 8 a.m.,” “For Emily Dickinson on the 100th Anniversary of Her Birth” and “Nothing to Declare”—have only been published in Czech, not in English. Thus I would argue that Pollet, at least bibliographically, is partly a Czech poet. And in the ethernet, at least someone has picked up on it: “Pro Emily Dickinsonovou ke stému výročí její smrti” is quoted in its entirety on the Czech webpage celebrating Emily Dickinson (featuring all of Dickinson’s poems in the original, alongside all of the Czech translations) [<http://alarmo.nostalghia.cz/emily/blackcake.htm>].

Pollet is represented by thirteen poems here—more than any other poet in the book, which includes such “names” as Hayden Carruth, James Laughlin, James Merrill, and Charles Simic. To a casual reader of American poetry, Pollet’s lion’s share of the book would seem to indicate that he is a major American poet. I believe that the amount of his exposure has partly to do with Mikeš’s affinity for Pollet’s work, and partly to do with the fact that Pollet had just visited the Czech Republic to read his poetry—the media coverage was enough to make Pollet a “name” for Czech poetry readers. And the subsequent publication of *Vítr z Narragansettu* has fixed that name recognition. It is probably not my place to judge what the “average Czech poetry reader” would make of Pollet’s poems

within the volume as compared to other poets, but I would hazard that due to their contemplative and universal nature (no obscure references to places, people or events outside the Czech context) they would be among the better contributions to the anthology. (And as mentioned in the last paragraph, already commemorated on a Czech website dedicated to American poetry.)

Pollet's influence can be shown, however, in the media. During the Poetry Without Borders festival, Petra Žallmanová gave a profile of the "major" poets visiting the festival and described Pollet thusly:

Sylvester Pollet gradually assumed the role of festival mascot—this tall, white-haired and white-bearded poet, as if cut out of a painting by Henri Rousseau, attended every festival event, without exception, as an audience member. He carried out his own performance with the same resolve and precision. Pollet's poetry is delicate and meditative, inspired by nature, composed of sensitive and visual images, which are so unique that the audience at Pávilon E listened with bated breath to sixty in a row.<sup>33</sup>

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33. "Sylvester Pollet se postupně pasoval do role festivalového maskota - tento vysoký bělovlasý a bělovousý poeta, jakoby vystřižený z obrazu Henri Rousseaua, se s nezlomnou pravidelností účastnil coby divák všech festivalových akcí. Své vlastní vystoupení zvládl se stejným odhodláním a přesností. Polletova poezie je jemná a meditativní, inspirovaná přírodou, složená z pocitových i vizuálních obrazů, které jsou natolik jedinečné, že publikum Pávilonu E jich se zatajeným dechem zvládlo i šedesát v řadě." Petra Žallmanová, *iliteratura.cz* [<http://www.iliteratura.cz/Clanek/9601/americti-basnici-na-poezie-bez-hranic-2002>]

This is similar to the figure Pollet cut at poetry festivals in Maine—where he was very much present, even when not on stage. From personal observations and personal conversations with Pollet, he was less a mascot at the Olomouc festival than a representative of contemporary American poetry. Tall and striking-looking, he stood out in the crowd. Many Czech poets and poetry readers present at the festival took the opportunity to ask him questions about contemporary American poetry, favorite American poets, and poetry publishing. Pollet took the time to answer each query in depth, like a patient teacher.

He was also certainly there to listen as an interested poetry lover, and keen to make new acquaintances and connections. As a poetry publisher, he was looking for new talent, and ended up publishing *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets* by two of the poets performing at the festival whom he had not heard of previously: Georgia Scott (pseudonym of Cheryl Malcolm) and Martin Reiner. Some five years later Reiner was interviewed by the Czech weekly *Týden* (“The Week”—roughly comparable to U.S. weeklies *Time* or *Newsweek*):

*You’re traveling fairly often—Australia, New York, Vietnam... Now you’ve just returned from San Francisco, where a book of yours was published this summer. How did such a thing come about?*

The American poet and publisher Sylvester Pollet, who was at the festival in Olomouc, had been sending me folded poetry puzzles for several years, which he tirelessly published in Maine. When I first had



my hands on English translations of my poetry, as part of a festival run by Americans in Prague, I sent them to him, to kind of even things up. And he published them! And he also sent them all over the USA, to the same kind of madmen as myself. One of them, a certain Bert Benson from the West Coast, later wrote to say that he wanted to publish a book of new works. And this year a slim volume of thirty-five texts was published... and on the basis of this publication they invited me to the Other Words festival in San Francisco. So it's not about fame or money, but it's all about the good feeling that takes over me when considering that my sudden and unexpected American career is based solely on the relationship of these people to the texts themselves.<sup>34</sup>

“Ping-Pong with a Bashful Millionaire— an Interview with Martin Reiner”

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34. “*Jste poměrně často na cestách. Austrálie, New York, Vietnam... Ted' jste se vrátil ze San Franciska, kde vám v létě vyšla knížka. Jak se taková věc přihodí?*”

Americký básník a vydavatel Sylvester Pollet, který byl na festivalu v Olomouci, mi několik let posílal skládačky s poezií, kterou neúnavně vydával v Maine. Když jsem pak kvůli festivalu, který pořádají pražští Američané, dostal do ruky své první anglické překlady, poslal jsem mu je, abych se nějak revanšoval. A on je vydal! A taky je rozeslal po celé Americe, podobným pošetlům, jako je sám. Jeden z nich, jistý Bert Benson ze západního pobřeží, se pak ozval, že chce vydat knihu nových věcí. Letos vyšla útlá knížečka s pětaticeti texty... a na základě téhle publikace mě pak pozvali do San Franciska na festival Other Words.

Není to ani o slávě, ani o penězích, ale o dobrém pocitu, který se mě zmocňuje při vědomí, že celá má náhlá americká kariéra je založena pouze a jedině na vztahu těch lidí k samotným textům.” 25.11.2007 12:00 *Rozhovor*. Archived at [[http://www.tyden.cz/rozhovory/ping-pong-s-plachym-milionarem\\_32003.html](http://www.tyden.cz/rozhovory/ping-pong-s-plachym-milionarem_32003.html)]

As Reiner's personal commentary attests, Pollet did a lot in his small way to promote Czech poetry in the US, within a small but very influential circle of established poets and critics. The printing of one piece of paper, folded thrice, evolved into a book and an invitation for Reiner to read at an international poetry festival in San Francisco.<sup>35</sup>

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35. "The Other Words festival offers a rare opportunity to step out of the monolingual fixation, to experience some of the world's extraordinary poetry in its original music, and encounter the crucial act of translation. The actual fact of multi-national diversity and other voices will be singularly present more than ever in San Francisco over the three days of the festival. Poets in the festival are internationally acclaimed and in several cases the poets will be reading their poetry in the US for the first time." [<http://otherwords08.wordpress.com>]

#### **4. The Publisher—*Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets***

While Sylvester Pollet had already been publishing occasional poems in various non-traditional formats as *Backwoods Broadsides* in Maine since the 1970s, his *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets* series represents a substantial publishing endeavor, one which took up most of his spare time (especially correspondence, including individual mailing).

In all, the *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets* represent the work of 101 authors and 12 translators—a vast output, even in a small format. To examine this series in depth is beyond the scope of this dissertation; but an overview is in order, perhaps to lay the foundation for future scholars.

Through reading and rereading, a few themes become evident: 1) writers' connections to Maine; 2) poetry in translation; 3) writers crossing borders; 4) experimentation; 5) writers of the generation born before WW2. 1) Maine and its allure for writers has already been discussed. Pollet spent the last half of his life in Maine and so his connections to Maine writers are obvious. In the Appendix are listed writers who have direct connections to Maine; not included are those writers from away whom Sylvester met in Maine—at poetry festivals, etc. 2) As for poetry in translation, there are twelve *BB Chaplets* which are stated as poetry in translation (there are some others which “borrow” from other languages, but are not strictly poems in translation)—thus, 12% of the series. While I do not have figures on the number of American books of poetry which are translations,<sup>36</sup> I

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36. I did look for such a figure.

would hazard that it would be far less than 10%. So this is unusual, and in the Maine context, more than unusual. 3) A related topic is writers crossing borders. It used to be the case that most Mainers lived there their entire lives, due to its isolation. As mentioned previously in this dissertation, Maine is now losing population; the young people are moving away—as did I. And so you have John Burns—a native of my hometown of Waterville, Maine—in Portugal, translating from the Portuguese. Ken Rosen of Portland, Maine, writing from Cyprus—where the idea of “border” is omnipresent. And non-Mainers, such as Jerome Rothenberg, writing from Japan. Canadian poets, English poets, French poets, Belgian, Finnish, Italian and Nepalese poets are found here. 4) Certainly all good poetry is a form of experiment. But there is some quite radical experimental poetry within the series, housed within a tight physical space. In addition to various experiments in found poetry, the experimental poetry found in the *BB Chaplets* series makes use of technology; here, printing technology, such as a poem generated by Internet chat in print form, lettriste poetry, alphabetic poetry, images cut from a catalog, words obliterated from a text—leaving (w)holes. And I would argue that the graphic and layout designer for the series, MaJo Keleshian, if not experimental, certainly pushed the limits of what her computer and her readers were capable of: in addition to the experimental poetry which required special layouts, on top of Roman alphabets we find Chinese, cuneiform, Czech diacritics, Egyptian hieroglyphics, Hebrew, Sanskrit... and much to stump the spell-

checker.<sup>37</sup> 5) Of course, Pollet himself was a writer of the generation born before World War 2,<sup>38</sup> and naturally he would be sympathetic to his own generation—and that immediately preceding it—in terms of content and expression. One of the distinguishing features of the *BB Chaplets* is its roster of writers: there are some heavy hitters here. A large number of “anthology” poets, almost one-third already entombed in the pages of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. What’s “surprising” is that they are still writing, and looking to publish in such a non-official, samizdat format. Their sentiments are sometimes those who are saying goodbye—just as Pollet did in his coda to the *BB Chaplets* [see Figure 12]. Also, they are saying goodbye to the 20th century—a sort of fin-de-siècle feeling pervades the *Chaplets*.

For each of the following sections, I will select one poet to go into more detail.

#### 1) Maine

Pollet’s *Backwoods Broadsides* began as a publishing experiment in the 1970s to print poems by Maine authors (his friends, mostly) in unique, non-commercial formats such as bookmarks. It was an occasional pastime of Pollet’s, nothing

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37. Speaking of MaJo and Sylvester, the other husband-and-wife duos represented in the *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets* are Meredith and Peter Quartermain, Anne Tardos and Jackson Mac Low, Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop, and Hoa Nguyen and Dale Smith—the latter duo were also the editors of *Skanky Possum*, a poetry magazine which ran from 1998–2003. Certainly, others were lovers.

38. I’m writing from the American perspective; the U.S.A. entered the war in December 1941.

more. Pollet's enthusiasm for poetry was spent rather on his own compositions, in discussions with other poets, and increasingly in engaging his creative writing students at the University of Maine into poetry and fostering their own work. Over the years however, he started to think again about publishing.<sup>39</sup> He wanted to keep the physical format of the poetry simple, and to keep the roster of poets simple. There are thousands of good poets out there, and plenty of very good ones. Why not keep it close to home... not to solicit entries from everywhere, but to urge those you know to contribute something?<sup>40</sup> The first *BB Chaplet* was Sylvester's own *The Dandelion Sutras*, and it remains the bestseller [see Figure 5]. Close to home, for out of the first eleven *BB Chaplets*, only two of the writers were not from Maine,<sup>41</sup> and these were Elizabeth Pollet, Sylvester's sister, and Rochelle Owens, the Obie-winning playwright whom Pollet knew from his readings in the 1960s at Les Deux Mégots. Altogether, more than twenty percent of the series is by Maine authors or translators.

While earlier in this dissertation I have praised Maine for the isolated qualities it offers the writer, not all the Mainers here fit the traditional mold of

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39. As a reader of student work, I can understand the urge to read and publish "mature" works.

40. In a phrase: *Texty přátel*.

41. I'm counting Czech poet Petr Mikeš as a Mainer, because he was living in Maine on a Fulbright Foundation grant when *BB Chaplet #4 The Memory of the Wound/Paměť rány* was published. *BB Chaplet #7* is by Robert Desnos, but his translator was Carl Little, a Maine poet and friend of Sylvester's. Desnos died in 1945 at Terezín, another Czech connection.

natives, writing about place (as does non-native John Wetterau, *BB Chaplets #2...* but again, not entirely!).

To go into a bit of detail, out of the first dozen Mainers, Sylvester Pollet (*BB Chaplets #1*, “The Dandelion Sutras”) does write about place, but the form is Eastern, and Buddhist, not Puritan. John Wetterau’s poetry mostly is set in Maine, but there is one poem set in the New York City of his youth, one at the US Marine training center and depot on Parris Island, South Carolina, and another in Vietnam (during the war). Kathleen Lignell’s “River Songs” (*BB Chaplets #3*) are twenty poems “loosely based on the two or four-line poetic forms in Spanish called *jarchas*. *Jarchas* date from about the eleventh century and were in the early European genre of women’s folk songs.” While the subject matter is universal, about love and longing, heartache, passion and betrayal, one of the lines mentions Maine “In Maine in the early spring...” (#15), but one does not “You fill my bed with iguanas...” (#12). Unless the man works in an exotic pet shop, this is set far from Maine.<sup>42</sup> Petr Mikeš’s Czech-English verse (*BB Chaplets #4*) could be take place anywhere. It is the first bilingual Chaplet, and sets the stage for many more to come. Czech verse which quotes Ezra Pound seems right at home in Maine, the headquarters for Pound studies, and yet doesn’t, as the rhythms don’t seem native. Theodore “Ted” Enslin was a significant American poet who moved to Maine in 1960 for solitude by the sea. His “Mad Songs” (*BB Chaplets #6*) invoke the sea,

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42. I am well aware of Jim Morrison and his “lizard,” and the possible sexual connotations of this word.

sun, air, and caves of the Maine coast but are universal in nature. There is not even anything to connect the poems with the twentieth century.

“Mnemosyne” (#9) is mentioned, and the poems could have been written by a contemporary of Homer, were it not for the one German word “allein” (#11).

Maine poet Carl Little translated Robert Denos’s “Chantefables et

Chantefleurs” (published 1955) as *BB Chaplets* #7, “Songfables and

Songflowers.” A compendium of flora and fauna, some also native to Maine and

some not. David Gordon’s “from STEM: Part IV of a Long Poem” (*BB Chaplets*

#8), reads like a modern day Poundian Canto, taking the reader on a journey from

Babylon to Egypt to Greece, to West Africa to Outer Space to Czechoslovakia,<sup>43</sup>

and using cuneiform, hieroglyphics, Sanskrit, Chinese, Greek, German, and Czech

to get us there. Bern Porter’s “13/17” (*BB Chaplets* #11) will be described in more

detail in part 4 (Experimental Poetry) of this chapter. Anna Meek’s “Jascha

Heifetz: A Poem in Six Parts” (*BB Chaplets* #17) reflects her passion for the violin

as well as for poetry. Although Anna was born in Maine (she’s the daughter of a

poet, Jay Meek, who for some years taught at Colby College) there’s nothing

“Maine” here at all, as the poet follows Heifetz from Lithuania to Jerusalem.

Jennifer Craig Pixley’s “A Real Toad” (*BB Chaplets* #16) is self-consciously New

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43. Yes, here again, the Czech influence. In addition to quoting Havel’s *Dopisy Olze*, he also quotes Zbyněk Žába’s translations from Ptahhotep.

[Yet another Czech influence is *BB Chaplets* #74, “Cakes with Bathsheeba” by Georgia Scott, which had its premiere at a bordello during the Poetry Without Borders festival in Olomouc in 2002, during which she covered somebody with feathers.]



England poetry, describing the flora and fauna native to the region, tinged with some philosophical musings in an attempt to sound like Emily Dickinson, though much more wordy. Mark Nowak's "Zwyczaj" (*BB Chaplets* #29) is a postmodern description of his attempts to get the family pierogi recipe. Robert Creeley's mother's family was from Maine, and he spent much of his life there. Creeley's "Clemente's Images" (*BB Chaplets* #50) are 25 short rhymed poems, in almost childlike language:

1.  
Sleeping birds, lead me,  
soft birds, be me  
  
inside this black room,  
back of the white moon.  
  
In the dark night  
sight frightens me.

Originally, they were written to accompany 25 paintings by Francesco

Clemente.<sup>44</sup> Francesco Clemente (b. 1952) is a visual artist who has collaborated

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44. "Clemente: A Retrospective," Guggenheim Museum, 1999. The poems and images were published together in *Clemente: A Retrospective* (Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2000) 178–229. Creeley also wrote the words to accompany other series of paintings by Clemente: *Life & Death* (1993; published by the Grenfell Press, in a limited edition of 70 copies), viewable on-line at [<http://cdm.reed.edu/cdm4/artbooks/creeley.php>] and *Anamorphosis* (1997; published by the Gagosian Gallery in a limited edition of 1500 copies), viewable

with other poets, including Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, and John Weiners.<sup>45</sup> Freed of the images, Creeley's poems create a remarkable whole by themselves. The language is simple and contemplative, and yet melodic—reminiscent of the later poems of William Carlos Williams,<sup>46</sup> and like Williams, proof that poets do not necessarily decline with advancing age. The poetic flow seems almost effortless, with the communicational power of Whitman and the brevity of Hemingway. Creeley is sure to be considered a major American poet, and this is an astonishing poetic sequence, one of the real triumphs of the *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets*.

All in all, what is “Maine” about these poets? It is almost as if the situation described by one critic (on New England, in general) has been reversed:

Konec velrybářství a ústup loďářství způsobil, že Nová Anglie byla ještě izolovanější než předtím. Nebylo snadné se tam dostat a taktéž nebylo lehké od tamtud odejít. (Sweney, *Vítr* 207)

[The end of whaling and decline of boat-building resulted in New England being even more isolated than before. It was not easy to get there, or once there, to leave.]

Instead, the situation—at least, from the perspective of poets and poetry, rather

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on-line at [[http://www.2river.org/2RView/2\\_2/poems/anamorphosis.html](http://www.2river.org/2RView/2_2/poems/anamorphosis.html)].

45. Francesco Clemente and Michael McClure, *Testa Coda* (Gagosian Gallery / Rizzoli, 1992); Francesco Clemente and Allen Ginsberg, *White Shroud; Images from Mind and Space; Black Shroud* (artist's books, 1983–1985—see [<http://www.francescoclemente.net/poets/1.html>]); Francesco Clemente and John Weiners, *Early Morning Exercises* (artist's book, 1985).

46. I'm thinking of *Pictures from Bruegel* (New York: New Directions, 1962).

than the economic reality—seems to echo that of New England in its 19th century heyday, when, for example Melville’s “námořní příběhy přirozeně začínají v Nové Anglii a jsou o objevování světa” [sea stories naturally begin in New England, and are about discovering the world] (Sweney, *Vítr* 207).

## 2) Poetry in Translation

The *Backwoods Broadsides* that feature poetry in translation begin with Petr Mikeš. Mikeš met Pollet in Maine in 1990, and the meeting was a pivotal one. Mikeš own samizdat activities spurred Pollet on to create the *BB Chaplets*, and as mentioned previously, Mikeš is the only poet featured in two *Chaplets*. What is more, Mikeš started the “Czech connection” with the *Chaplets*, and in terms of the language of poetry in translation here, Czech is in first place.<sup>47</sup> Mikeš has reciprocated the favor, publishing Pollet in Czech translation (see the Bibliography: In Czech Translation). Pollet met Martin Reiner (*BB Chaplets* #89) through Mikeš. Bronislava Volková, another of the translated poets (*BB Chaplets* #91), is a friend of Mikeš’s and one of the biggest promoters of Czech poetry in English translation—but with four titles from Czech, Pollet could have counted himself as one of them as well. Pollet read and translated from French, but Czech was not one of his languages. The Bums’ Academy, the 1970s group of Maine

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47. Czech is in first place with four titles, French and Portuguese each have two, Russian and Spanish one.

poets which included Pollet, often met to read and discuss poetry translated from other languages. Poetry in translation offers not only access to other visions from over the world, but also insights into other possible poetic techniques and forms— invaluable material for those who make art out of words.

### 3) Writers Crossing Borders

A cousin category to poetry in translation, “writers crossing borders” are English language writers reporting from abroad. They bring new sights and sometimes new sounds to their audience. In the *BB Chaplets* series these include Jerome Rothenberg (*BB Chaplets* #33, “At the Grave of Nakahra Chuya”), Kathleen Fraser (*BB Chaplets* #35, “Banners: Tokyo”), and Kenneth Rosen (*BB Chaplets* #98, “The End of Cyprus”). All of the above were born before WW2: Rosen is a well-known poet in Maine and regular contributor to *The Paris Review*;<sup>48</sup> Fraser is the founder of the American Poetry Archives; but the most famous among them is certainly Jerome Rothenberg. Rothenberg’s life-long emphasis on poetry in translation and on ethno-poetry has made him a world-figure in poetry circles.

In April 1997, Rothenberg traveled to Japan to attend a festival commemorating the poet Nakahara Chuya on the sixtieth anniversary of his death. His three-part poem includes visual images from the graveside ceremony, brief

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48. His son, the poet Andrew Rosen, is also well-known in Maine and is the publisher of the samizdat poetry and visual art series *Technology of the Sun*.

translations/quotations from the poet's works, and ruminations on poetry, death,  
and even on the end-of-the-century:

3

AT THE GRAVESIDE

*if you feel your body like a single speck*

*you will not mind about anything*

N.C.

it is because of you we come here

sixty years beyond your death

& pour a jug of sake

on your stone

the round voice of the priest

the sacerdotal lamentation sounding

high over those hills

the little sticks of incense

plunged like children's toys

into the earth

the century around us fizzling out

the greater terror absent from your life

but entering your dreams like mine

last night in which I waited

on a rooftop  
saw a city opening in front of me  
a message posted on the mansard tiles  
the pope's hope of salvation  
written large that tells us  
"JESUS KILLS"  
until I lose my grip my fingers  
barely holding on  
your words repeating in my mind  
*people are strange when just about to die*  
(...)

The nature of the *Backwood Broadsides Chaplets'* distribution—one piece of paper, folded in thirds, enclosed in an envelope and sent by regular post—is ideal for this kind of poetry: like a letter or postcard from abroad. The reader, opening the post from Rothenberg via Pollet, is inside the poem (literally) immediately; the medium is pure and almost transparent.

#### 4) Experimental Poetry

All innovative poetry is experimentation in some form or other—at least for the author. What I mean by the term “experimental” poetry here is

experimentation with peoples' conceptions of what poetry is or can be.

We're all postmodern now, nothing should surprise us: we had sound poetry in the womb and cut our teeth on Dada. But published poetry, especially series poetry in the U.S.A., does not take too many risks. Poetry magazines need three subs: sub-editors, subscriptions and subsidies. People—corporations<sup>49</sup>—are unwilling to subsidize poetry journals they cannot make sense out of.

Within the *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets* one-sheet-of-paper-format series, there are a fair number of *Chaplets* that play with form in some extreme ways. The physical size and quality of the medium limits what one can do: you have a simple sheet of paper, and no funds for expensive inks nor special cutting or folding or other intrusions.<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, the low cost is conducive for experimentation, given the limitations of the medium (i.e., black and white or grey-scale images, black ink on colored paper). And the folding into threes gives one a front page, a choice of how to use the interior (i.e., columns or tableau), and a back page. In other words, the poet-artist has some leeway as to using separate images/poems, linked images/poems or one large piece.

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49. See the landmark January 2010 U.S. Supreme Court ruling on *Citizens United vs. The Federal Election Commission*, where the Court ruled that corporation support of election campaigns cannot be restricted, as corporations are protected under the First Amendment unlimited right to free speech. Part of the fallout from this decision has meant lesser corporate funding for the arts.

50. See, for example, the Artistbook (a/k/a Book Art) collection at the Olomouc Museum of Modern Art [Sbírka autorských knih].

Some of the experimental poems in the series do not make use of graphical elements—specifically, those by David Giannani (*BB Chaplets* #24, “Others’ Lines”), Alan Jennifer Sondheim (*BB Chaplets* #43, “Jennifer in Phaedra”) and Douglas Barbour & Sheila E. Murphy (*BB Chaplets* #73, “Continuations”). Giannani literally uses others’ lines—poems made up of three separate lines from three different famous poets. Alan Jennifer Sondheim is the amalgam of Alan Sondheim and “Jennifer,” an Internet chat friend who intrudes into his compositions. Douglas Barbour & Sheila E. Murphy are two poets who met at a reading by Barbour in 1999—since that meeting they have collaborated by e-mail, writing poems in tandem, each composing six lines on a daily basis, an ongoing project called “Continuations.”<sup>51</sup>

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51. For more information, see the Barbour issue of the Australian on-line poetry journal *Jacket* (39: Early 2010) [<http://jacketmagazine.com/39/barbour-sheila-murphy.shtml>].



As for the others, Anne Tardos (*BB Chaplets #20*, “Writing”) makes poetry

out of the *act* of writing: this is alphabetic, rhythmic visual poetry:

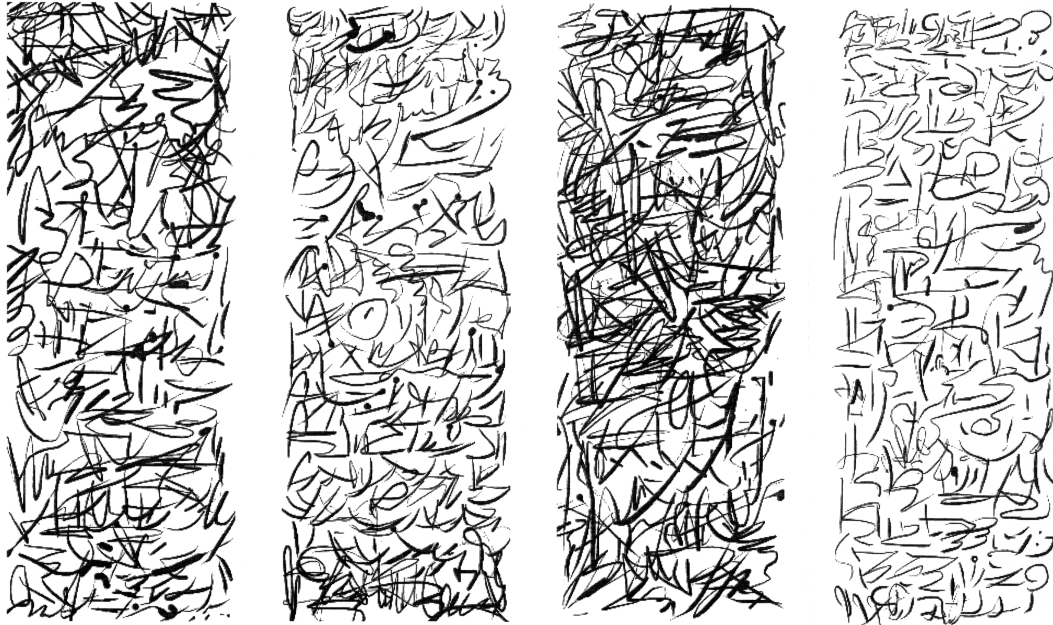


Figure 7. From Anne Tardos’s “Writing.”

Joan Retallack (*BB Chaplets #42*, “Noh S’ ex”) made excellent use of the column format, making letter/word equations that equal or do not equal the other side — this comes as no surprise, for as both a poet and critic she is focused on the idea of composition.<sup>52</sup>

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52. See for example *MUSICAGE / CAGE MUSES on Words. Art. Music: John Cage in Conversation with Joan Retallack*. (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996).



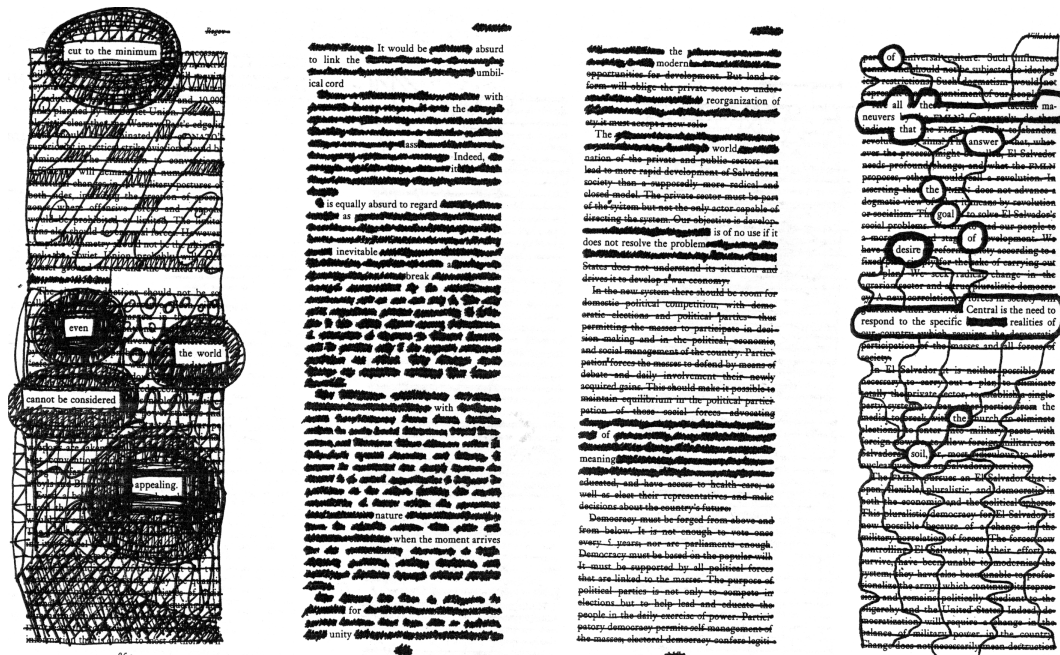


Figure 9. The beginning of Mark Melnicov’s “Foreign Policy.”

Kristin Prevallet’s *BB Chaplets* #66, “Reading Index (text indice)” is a conceptual piece which involves reader response, Freud, a graph, and a word index of reactive words. But the most ambitious—or least ambitious, depending on your point of view—*Backwood Broadside Chaplet* is certainly Bern Porter’s “13/17.”

Bern Porter’s “13/17” is typical Bern Porter.<sup>53</sup> Bern Porter was a Maine icon, a boy from Porter Township (the family farm in desolate Northern Maine) who was a genius in both English and Sciences, winning essay competitions, writing poetry, and winning science scholarships. Bern Porter had one of the early patents for the cathode ray tube, which later became the television screen, and worked on the Manhattan project (on enriching uranium). He was disgusted by the

53. The information here on Bern Porter’s life comes from documents stored at the Bern Porter Collection, Special Collections, Miller Library, Colby College, Waterville, Maine, USA.

atomic bomb, and put the money from his royalties into independently publishing the likes of Robert Duncan, Henry Miller (he was Miller's first US publisher), Kenneth Patchen, Parker Tyler, etc. Later he was asked to work under Werner von Braun on the Saturn V project. Porter took his money and returned to Maine, buying a house near the coast in the small town of Belfast, where he kept an open house to all interested in his theories on art and life. By most accounts, Porter was mad, but a genius nonetheless.<sup>54</sup> His book *Found Poems* (1972) was influential to a generation of concrete poets in the 1970s. "13/17" is made up of six grey-scale images, which look like photocopies of pages from a color catalog advertising fitness equipment, cut to fit the folds of the *BB Chaplets* format. There are no words.

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54. I spent a few hours once with Bern in his home in Belfast. I would reckon the man was mad, but there was method to his madness. He was trying to impress upon me the physics behind a HEPA air filter. For more on Porter, see his webpage at the Museum of Modern Art [<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/lostandfound/>].

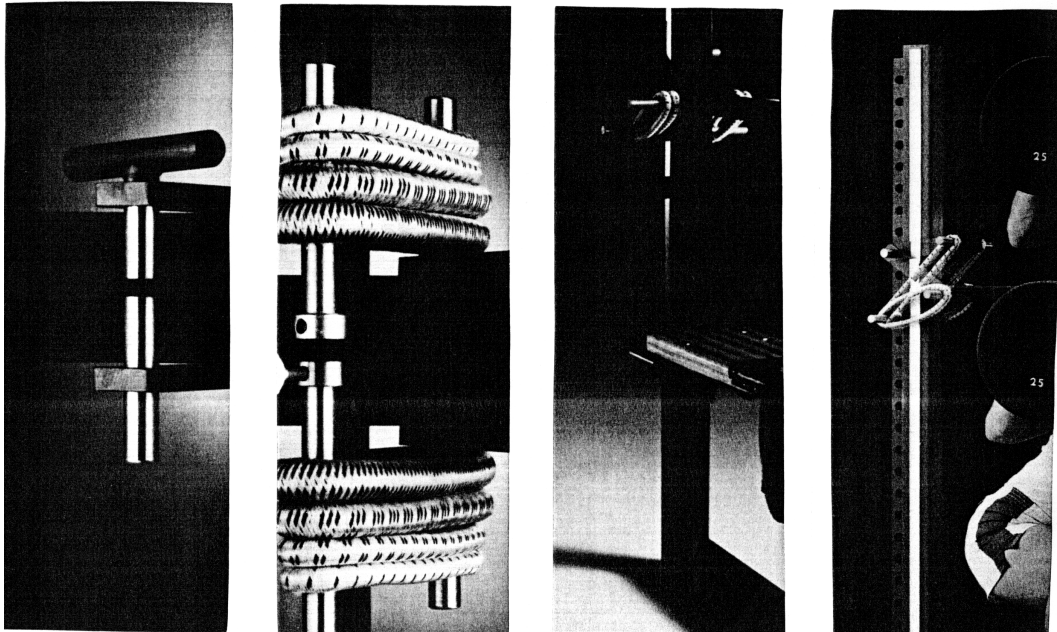


Figure 10. From Bern Porter's "13/17."

"13/17," whatever it is, is the most experimental of all the *BB Chaplets*, and perhaps the *Backwoods Broadsides* publishing endeavor as a whole. Pollet's standardized endpages for this number look positively primitive and 20th century pedestrian in comparison.

What the *BB Chaplets* offer experimental poets is a low-budget format which is ideal for certain kinds of art. For one, it is standalone: one judges it on its own merits. Secondly, because of the time frame involved between receiving one issue and the next, the reader/subscriber has time (sometimes months!) to contemplate the piece—to pick it up and put it down, without turning the page to find another piece to distract one's attention.

## 5) Poets of the Generation Born Before WW2

Roughly half of the poets published in the *BB Chaplets* are from the generation born before WW2—i.e., in their sixties or older. Of course, this reflects the generational position of Pollet himself, and so it is natural that he would know others of his generation and share something of their impressions of the world.

But it is not natural in terms of poetry publications. And many of these poets are “name” poets, poets found in university anthologies—but at the same time, poets whose new poems are not finding publishing outlets. They have already been enshrined in the “American Poetry Wax Museum”<sup>55</sup> and so there is no need to deal with the real, living poet anymore—especially with ones concerned about dying.

Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997), in the years before he died, was constantly asking those around him if they knew any poems about dying. (As mentioned previously, Pollet’s *First Will and Testament* may have been written with a premonition of his coming death.)<sup>56</sup> In any case, Allen would not have been disappointed with Pollet’s list, including the likes of Diane Di Prima’s (*BB Chaplets* #19) “22 Death Poems.” Death is surely the theme of an older poet, as love is the theme of a young one.

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55. The title of a thick, excellent book by Jed Rasula on the anthologization, simple categorization, and eventual dismissal of American poets—see Works Cited.

56. As his wife MaJo wrote me, “Who knows?”

Almost all of the pre-WW2 generation poets here have ruminations on death, such as Cid Corman's (*BB Chaplets* #11) "A Baker's Dozen (For Sylvester)":

2

Two funerals

today around

the corner on

the main drag. No

people I know

but close enough

to be part of.

5

Death is the

dance life does.

Alone with

alone on  
the crowded  
floor. Silence –  
  
the music –  
finally –  
reaching us.

Or as Anselm Hollo (b. 1934) so succinctly put it in the last of his “Pebbles” (*BB Chaplets* #38):

sign off  
sing on

Singling out a poet from the *BB Chaplets* to represent this generation is almost impossible. I’ve mentioned several already: Creeley, Porter, Rothenberg. For this section, I would like to focus on Amiri Baraka (b. LeRoi Jones, 1934—*BB Chaplets* #31, “Past Present”). One could certainly argue that other poets (such as Creeley) might be better, but Baraka is the perfect example of a poet of t/his generation who has always been outspoken and who is having a hard time in his seventies being heard.

His case is described in some detail in Rasula’s book:



But while Baraka has always retained a specific sense of black locution and the oral occasion, he became overtly political in a way that anthologies tend to resist. (Rasula 288)

—And Rasula’s book was published 5 years before Baraka’s poem “Somebody Blew Up America” (2001) caused scandal anew. “Somebody Blew Up America” keeps asking “Who?” was responsible for the September 11 attacks. The line “Who know why Five Israelis was filming the explosion/And cracking they sides at the notion” was taken out of context as an anti-Semitic remark and for Anti-Semitism, Baraka was dismissed from his post as Poet Laureate of New Jersey by the Governor of New Jersey.<sup>57</sup> The case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where it was refused to be heard. In fact, the poem says a lot worse things about African-American members of the Bush Administration—and about Clarence Thomas, a black Supreme Court Justice. Don’t poets have a right to ask difficult questions? Especially in a national emergency? And especially a Poet Laureate? Apparently not—and one should remember that the World Trade Center was overseen by the Port Authority of New York *and* New Jersey.

Confronted with the discomfiting fact of Baraka’s development, from Black Mountain to Black Nationalism and then to revolutionary Communism—all of which was inexorably front and center in his poetry—white anthologists tended to reprint poems from his earliest phase (...) or, more often, trade him in for milder alternates.

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57. In my opinion, Baraka’s most heinous crime is that he is a NY Yankees fan.

(Rasula 289, fn 102)

And publishers as well. In fact, since the mid-1980s Baraka has been publishing his poems as samizdat publications, the work of printing amateurs (in both senses of the word): bad photocopies stapled into crude paper covers:

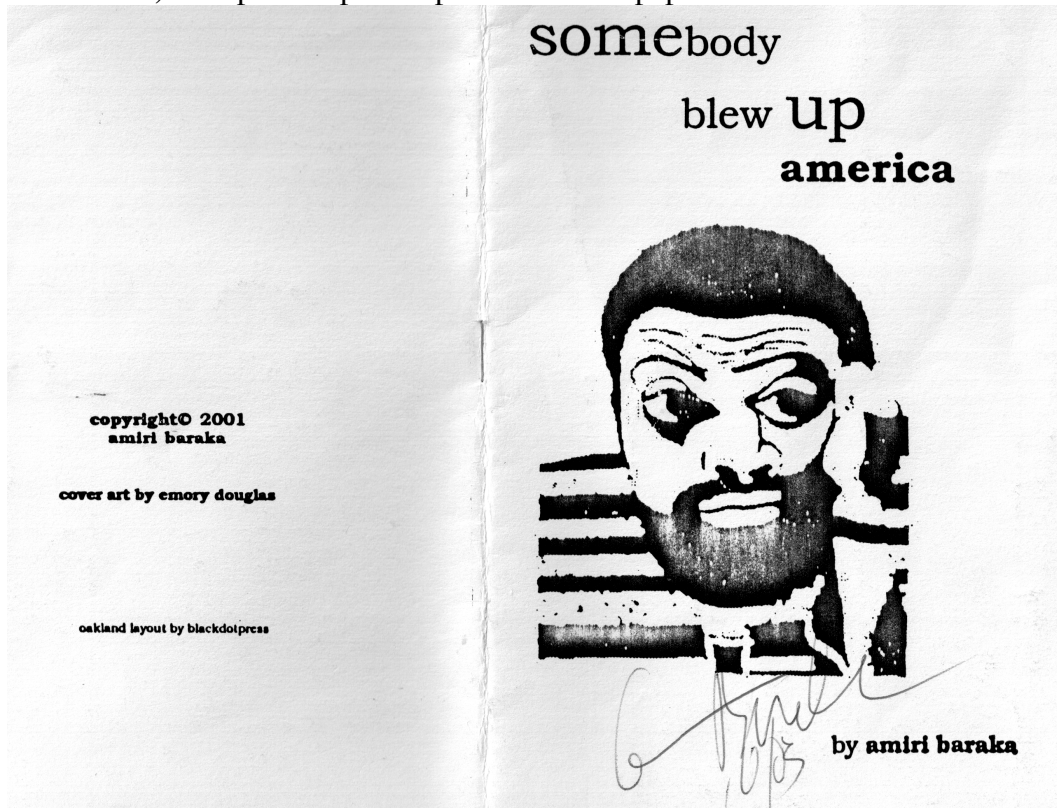


Figure 11. The cover of “Somebody Blew Up America” by Amiri Baraka.

“Somebody Blew Up America” is an angry reaction to acts of incredible violence.

But this is not the only side of Amiri B:

from “Past Present”

7

So from inside the

Sky of my Black Face

The stars speak to me

of themselves. And what

I learn is how to be

cool, blue and sparkling

my back-again Shine

jewelry-teeth moon

big whole

rising

Self

hangs and digs

And

“All

Day.”

is Lines &

Spaces

I use to run

& breathe

& Sing

This is not distant from Hollo nor Corman. If the *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets* become a mother lode of material for a future researcher, I think the richest vein might be the works by the poets of the older generation. There is much gold to be found there, and too little of it elsewhere.

The last poem of Baraka's *Chaplet* is entitled "Beginners Rules For Not Dying":

from Beginners Rules For Not Dying

(...)

Ishirini<sup>58</sup>: death is a form  
of ignorance

One of ignorance's greatest foes is a courageous, intelligent publisher.

For he makes his readers knowledgeable, and his writers immortal.

---

Pollet conceived his *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets* partly as a reaction to the Internet age: this is poetry to be kept in one's pocket, poetry to take with one on one's walk, for the daily pace of cutting bamboo and walking sticks, practicing calligraphy, for those who still write letters and for those who still like to receive them.

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### 1994

- 1 Sylvester Pollet *The Dandelion Sutras*
- 2 John Wetterau *Every Moment*
- 3 Kathleen Lignell *River Songs*
- 4 Petr Mikeš *The Memory of the Wound (Paměť rány)*

### 1995

- 5 Elizabeth Pollet *Outside the Circle*
- 6 Theodore Enslin *Mad Songs*
- 7 Robert Desnos/tr. Carl Little *Songfables and Songflowers*
- 8 David Gordon from *Stem: Part IV of a Long Poem*
- 9 Rochelle Owens *Luca: Discourse on Life and Death*
- 10 Carl Rakosi *Eight Songs and Meditations*
- 11 Bern Porter *13/17*
- 12 James Laughlin *The Empty Space*
- 13 Cid Corman *A Baker's Dozen*

### 1996

- 14 Jackson Mac Low *125 Postcard Poems*
- 15 Ronald Johnson *Road Side. Desert to Prairie*
- 16 George Economou *Nashvillanella & Other Rimes*
- 17 Anna Meek *Jascha Heifetz: A Poem in Six Parts*
- 18 Dick Higgins *Gangsta Flix*
- 19 Diane Di Prima *22 Death Poems*
- 20 Anne Tardos *Writing*
- 21 Peter O'Leary *Watchfulness*
- 22 Anne Waldman *a slice at that*
- 23 Andrew Schelling *Jasmine & Thunder*

### 1997

- 24 David Giannini *Others' Lines*
- 25 Lane Dunlop *A Wind Off the Sea*
- 26 Jennifer Craig Pixley *A Real Toad*
- 27 Peter Money *Between Ourselves*
- 28 Mary de Rachewiltz *Family Tree*
- 29 Mark Nowak *Zwyczaj*
- 30 Armand Schwerner *The Crystal Skull Pantoums*
- 31 Amiri Baraka *Past Present*

**1998**

- 32 Nathaniel Tarn *Some Smalls & Dogs Dreaming*  
33 Jerome Rothenberg *At The Grave of Nakahara Chuya*  
34 Kasuya Eiichi/tr. D. W. Wright *Chance Meeting*  
35 Kathleen Fraser *Banners: Tokyo*  
36 John Martone *Astilbe*  
37 Aram Saroyan *Open Field Suite*  
38 Anselm Hollo *Pebbles*  
39 Meredith Quartermain *Veers*

**1999**

- 40 Jonathan Williams *Amuse-Gueules Bemused Ghouls*  
41 Rachel Blau Duplessis *Draft 37: Praedelle*  
42 Joan Retallack *Noh S'ex*  
43 Alan Jennifer Sondheim *Jennifer in Phaedra*  
44 Sam Abrams *The Old Pothead Poems*  
45 Sheila E. Murphy *Volumetrics*  
46 Pierre Joris *Out/Takes*  
47 Richard Martin *Marks*

**2000**

- 48 Michael Heller *Cyclical*  
49 Sharon Doubiago *Alima Prayers*  
50 Robert Creeley *Clemente's Images*  
51 Geert Van Istendael *Krabat*  
52 Antler *Learning the Constellations*  
53 Lee Ann Brown *Jade Toys*  
54 Gerardo Beltran/tr. John Burns *April/Abril*  
55 Clayton Eshleman *Jisei*

**2001**

- 56 Robert Vas Dias *Select Things*  
57 Manoel Antonio/John Burns/Maria do Cebreiro *Intentions (Intencións)*  
58 William Benton *Azure Father*  
59 Benjamin Friedlander from *One Hundred Etudes*  
60 Patrizia de Rachewiltz *A Mountain Now*  
61 Devin Johnston *Aversion*  
62 Jennifer Moxley *Impervious to Starlight*  
63 Charles Rossiter *Cold Mountain 2000: Han Shan in the City*

**2002**

- 64 Tom Beckett *How Say*  
65 Osip Mandelstam/tr. Raina Kostova & Tony Brinkley *Lines on the Unknown Soldier*  
66 Kristin Prevallet *Reading Index (texte indice)*  
67 Nicole Brossard / tr. Sylvester Pollet from *Notebook on Roses and Civilization*  
68 Dale Smith *Coo-Coo Fourth July*  
69 A. L. Nielsen *The Assembly of God at Jasper*  
70 Michael McClintock *Anthology of Days*  
71 John Taggart *5 Pastorelles*

**2003**

- 72 Bob Arnold *Yokel*  
73 Douglas Barbour & Sheila E. Murphy *Continuations (Section VI)*  
74 Georgia Scott *Cakes with Bathsheba*  
75 Tsering Wangmo Dhompa *A Matter Not of Order*  
76 Sotère Torregian *Addenda (for August 15th)*  
77 Chantal Bizzini / tr. Brad Anderson *Spring's Grave (Le Tombeau du Printemps)*  
78 Jeffery Beam *Honey & Cooked Grapes*  
79 Petr Mikeš / tr. Matthew Sweney *The Stream of Darkness (Proud Tmy)*

**2004**

- 80 Burt Kimmelman *Late in a Slow Time*  
81 Mark Melnicove *Foreign Policy*  
82 Hoa Nguyen *Add Some Blue*  
83 David Meltzer *Shema*  
84 George Bowering *Lost in the Library*  
85 Susan Maurer *Dream Addict*  
86 Rubén Medina *Pay Per View*  
87 Stephen Paul Miller *Nowhere To Go*

**2005**

- 88 Gary Lawless *Behind the Wall*  
89 Martin Reiner / tr. A. Oakland & P. Žallmannová *Where Is the Urn?*  
90 Jack Hirschman *The Anywhere Gone to Whatever Arcane*  
91 Bronislava Volková *Transformations*  
92 Rosmarie Waldrop *Second Language*  
93 Keith Waldrop from *Always in Arises*  
94 Alice Notley *Another Part of Now*  
95 Peter Quartermain *Getting Here*

**2006**

96 Joanne Kyger *Night Palace*

97 Robert Kelly *Samphire*

98 Kenneth Rosen *The End of Cyprus*

99 César Vallejo / tr. Clayton Eshleman *Wedding March (Marcha Nupcial)*

100 Jonathan Greene *Songs of Farewell* [with Coda by Pollet, see below]

**Key:**

CZ = Czech language original 4, 79, 89, 91 or ties to the Czech Republic 74, 91

DLB = Poet or translator has an entry in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 22, 23, 30, 31, 33, 35, 38, 40, 48, 49, 50, 55, 67, 71, 73, 83, 84, 92, 96, 97, 99

FRE = French language original 67, 77 or ties to France 66

JAP = Japanese language original 34 or ties to Japan 33, 35

ME = Maine poet 1, 2, 3, 6, 8, 11, 17, 26, 50, 62, 81, 88, 98 or translator 7, 54, 57, 65, 67, 79 or ties to Maine 4, 29, 79

PORT = Portuguese language original 54, 57

RUS = Russian language original 65

SPAN = Spanish language original 99

## BACKWOODS BROADSIDES

**Sylvester Pollet**

963 Winkumpaugh Rd.  
Ellsworth, Maine 04605-9529  
<pollet@maine.edu>



Songs of Farewell—the perfect title to end this series. Not that any of us are leaving immediately, necessarily, just that we're all on our way. If you have any doubts about that, just look down the list, and see how many wonderful writers have gone—even Creeley.

As for Backwoods BroadSides, I started publishing under that name in 1978, when I did a poem of mine to hand out at the Maine Poets Festival. But the idea for getting poetry out that way really came from New York in the 1960s, when I was working in the 8<sup>th</sup> St. Bookshop, reading in the Metro and Deux Mégots series, and seeing poetry change hands in every imaginable form, usually for free.

Over the years, I've used any number of formats, from postcards to Möbius strips to a set of bookmark poems by ten writers, distributed free in libraries and bookshops. This Chaplet Series, begun in 1994, has been quite a ride. The response, particularly from poets, internationally, has been extraordinary. Without that, I'd never have continued so long; with it, I decided to see if I could make it all the way to Number 100. Done! I thank you all: subscribers, poets, and especially my resident artist MaJo Keleshian, who works the final layout magic.

Now, it's time to put more time into my own writing, my dharma practice, and whatever's next. That will include some broadsides, I'm sure, but likely smaller, sporadic, less costly to produce and mail. Those people who have subscribed recently and not gotten eight numbers, please order the balance from back issues. Again, thank you all.

A handwritten signature in green ink that reads "Sylvester". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.

Sylvester Pollet, July 2006

[image: backwoodscoda.tiff]

Figure 12. The coda to Sylvester Pollet's *Backwoods BroadSides Chaplets* series.

Source: Petr Mikeš.



## **Souhrn (Resumé)**

Disertace má za cíl zmapovat život, dílo a vliv Jeana Clauda Sylvestera Polleta (1939–2007). Sylvester Pollet byl básníkem, pedagogem a vydavatelem, jenž se narodil do umělecké rodiny v New Yorku, avšak na počátku sedmdesátých let odešel z New Yorku do Maine, aby se „navrátil k přírodě“. Jako básník zplodil za čtyři desítky let čtyři menší básnické sbírky; jako učitel učil číst a psát poezii několik generací zpravidla chudých mainských studentů; jako redaktor redigoval publikace Národní nadace pro poezii na Mainské univerzitě v Oronu; a jako nakladatel vydal sto čísel svého „mainského samizdatu“ zvaného *Backwoods Broadsides (Lesní listy)*.

Disertace přináší první důkladnější kritický pohled na život a dílo Sylvestera Polleta. Mým cílem je podrobně rozebrat jeho básnickou tvorbu, a to i s ohledem na vztah k jeho soukromému životu a osobním názorům. Tato práce je potřebná už z toho důvodu, že až do Polletovy smrti existovalo více zdrojů o Polletovi v češtině než angličtině (v důsledku ohlasu, jaký vyvolala jeho návštěva na festivalu Poezie bez hranic v Olomouci v roce 2002). Části práce již byly vydány v rámci mé monografie o Polletovi přeložené do češtiny (*Básník Sylvester Pollet*, 2011). Součástí disertace je úplná bibliografie kritických děl věnovaných jeho tvorbě.

Dlužno dodat, že Polletův odkaz zahrnuje dle mého soudu i jeden z nejpozoruhodnějších nakladatelských počinů na poli americké poezie za poslední léta – a tím je jeho edice *Lesních listů*. Vzhledem k jejich rozsahu a

množství jim však bude v analýze věnována pouze stručná pozornost. Zevrubnější rozbor pak zůstane úkolem pro další literární vědce, kteří budou moci s časovým odstupem náležitě zhodnotit jejich přínos. V příloze se rovněž nachází úplný seznam autorů a titulů vydaných v Polletových *Lesních listech*.

### **Abstract (Resumé anglicky)**

This dissertation seeks to map the life, work, and influence of Jean Claude Sylvester Pollet (1939–2007). Sylvester Pollet was a poet, teacher and publisher who was born into the arts community in New York, but who left New York City for Maine in the early 1970s to “get away from it all.” As a poet, he wrote four small books of poetry over four decades; as a teacher, he helped generations of mostly low-income Maine students to read and write poetry; as an editor, he copy-edited the publications of the National Poetry Foundation, based at the University of Maine at Orono; and as a publisher he produced 100 issues of his “Maine samizdat” series called *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets*.

This represents the first in-depth critical look at Pollet’s life and work. It is my intention to discuss his poetic works in detail, with background information on how they were related to his personal life and convictions. In my view, this is needed work, because until his death there were more references to Pollet in Czech than in English, due to reporting on his appearance at the 2002 Poetry Without Borders festival in Olomouc. In fact, parts of this dissertation have already been published in my monograph on Pollet, translated into Czech [*Báseň Sylvester Pollet*, H&H 2011]. This dissertation includes a complete bibliography of critical works on Pollet.

Lastly, his legacy includes what I think is one of the most remarkable American poetry publishing endeavors in recent years—Pollet’s *Backwoods Broadsides Chapbooks*. Because of their huge number, it is not in the scope of this

work to do more than introduce the series with a brief description and analysis. However, I herein provide a needed overview of their range and content to lay the foundation for future scholars—an in-depth discussion perhaps will require a longer temporal interval for proper reflection and evaluation of their import. A complete annotated bibliographical list of the *Backwoods Broad­sides Chaplets* authors and titles is included as an Appendix.

## **Coda**

*I have certainly known more men destroyed by the desire to have a wife and child and keep them in comfort than I have seen destroyed by drink and harlots.*

—W.B. Yeats, Extract 38, “Estrangement: Extracts from a Diary Kept in 1909,”  
*Autobiography*, p. 338

## **Anotace**

Příjmení a jméno autora:	Sweney Matthew, PhDr., M.A.
Název katedry a fakulty:	Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky, Filozofická fakulta
Vedoucí disertační práce:	Prof. PhDr. Marcel Arbeit, Dr.
Počet znaků:	118.148 (včetně mezer)
Počet příloh:	1
Název práce v češtině:	Básník Sylvester Pollet a jeho <i>Backwoods Broadsides</i> (Lesní listy): Samizdat vyrobeno v Maine

**Klíčová slova:** samizdat, Maine, Sylvester Pollet, Backwoods Broadsides, americká poezie z 20. století, americká poezie z 21. století

**Anotace:** Disertace má za cíl zmapovat život, dílo a vliv Jeana Clauda Sylvestera Polleta (1939–2007). Sylvester Pollet byl básníkem, pedagogem a vydavatelem. Jako básník zplodil za čtyři desítky let čtyři menší básnické sbírky; jako učitel učil číst a psát poezii několik generací zpravidla chudých mainských studentů; jako redaktor redigoval publikace Národní nadace pro poezii na Mainské univerzitě v Oronu; a jako nakladatel vydal sto čísel svého „mainského samizdatu“ zvaného *Backwoods Broadsides* (Lesní listy). Disertace přináší první důkladnější kritický pohled na život a dílo Sylvestera Polleta. Části práce již byly vydány v rámci mé monografie o Polletovi přeložené do češtiny (*Básník Sylvester Pollet*, H&H 2011). Součástí disertace je úplná bibliografie kritických děl věnovaných jeho tvorbě. V příloze se rovněž nachází úplný seznam autorů a titulů vydaných v Polletových *Lesních listech*.

Author, surname first:	Sweney Matthew, PhDr., M.A.
Department and College:	Department of English and American Studies, Philosophical Faculty
Dissertation supervisor:	Prof. PhDr. Marcel Arbeit, Dr.
Total number of characters:	118,148 (including spaces)
Number of Addenda:	1
Title of dissertation:	The Poet Sylvester Pollet and his <i>Backwoods Broadsides</i> : <i>Samizdat Made in Maine</i>

**Klíčová slova v angličtině:** samizdat, Maine, Sylvester Pollet, Backwoods Broadsides, 20th century American poetry, 21st century American poetry

**Anotace v angličtině:** This dissertation seeks to map the life, work, and influence of Jean Claude Sylvester Pollet (1939–2007). Sylvester Pollet was a poet, teacher and publisher. As a poet, he wrote four small books of poetry over four decades; as a teacher, he helped generations of mostly low-income Maine students to read and write poetry; as an editor, he copy-edited the publications of the National Poetry Foundation, based at the University of Maine at Orono; and as a publisher he produced 100 issues of his “Maine samizdat” series called *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets*. This represents the first in-depth critical look at Pollet’s life and work. Parts of this dissertation have already been published in my monograph on Pollet, translated into Czech [*Básník Sylvester Pollet*, H&H 2011]. This dissertation includes a complete bibliography of critical works on Pollet. A complete annotated bibliographical list of the *Backwoods Broadsides Chaplets* authors and titles—the first—is included as an Appendix.