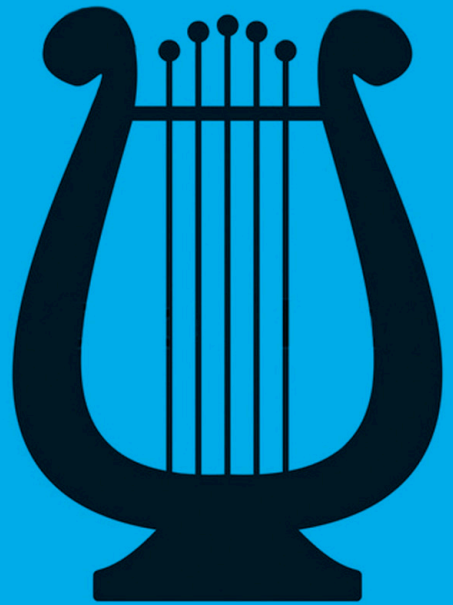
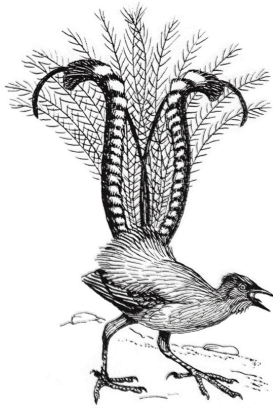


**A Bit of  
This and a Bit  
of That about  
Poetry**

**John Fraser**



A Bit of This  
and a Bit of That about  
Poetry



John Fraser

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*A Bit of This and a Bit of That* is for John Baxter and Tíree MacGregor.

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## A Bit of Bio

### I

I was never any good with definitions when I was little. “Define an epic.” Uh ... uh ... The *Odyssey*? ... *Paradise Lost*? ... *Beowulf*? ...

No no no, *define* an epic. An EPIC.

I still don’t have a grip on “metonymy.”

When a surly undergrad at another college said he’d spent his first tutorial arguing with C.S. Lewis about Neoplatonism, I didn’t even know about *Plato*, let alone Neo.

Ezra Pound’s *How to Read*, bought used for three-and-six in Mr. Embry’s thrilling little Ace Bookshop on Marchmont Street, had been a liberation for me as a newly aspiring Sixth Former, moving on from John Carter on Mars and Shark Gotch of the Islands.

He gave you the courage to read.

You didn’t have to possess *lacrimae rerum* Kulchur and perfect French in order to approach poets whom he recommended. You just had to read the poems themselves, and he named a number of poets and poems, but not solemnly, more like an enthusiastic eccentric uncle, and made you want to read some of them without feeling terminally *infra dig* if you never got around to Homer in a Latin translation.

And you yearned for his Provence. Where years later I read in a summer garden a newly acquired copy of Gautier’s *Emaux et Camées*, with the *eau-forte* portrait *par Jacquemart*. Plus a couple of great Fantômas reprints picked up from a market stall in Barjols.

And Pound said that an epic is a poem including history, and that the true English epic is Shakespeare’s history cycle.

### II

It was OK, too, not to genuflect before all the Names, Milton and everybody’s Lake District darling, Wordsworth, among them.

Half a century later, at a farewell seminar meeting, I was presented with a tape of Shakespeare's, I mean the *Bard's*, Sonnet 73 ("That time of year thou may'st in me behold") done straight as a country-and-western, each member singing a couple of lines. It really worked.

"Gloom and solemnity are entirely out of place in even the most rigorous study of an art originally intended to make glad the heart of man." (E.P. *ABC of Reading*)

And nerves that never flinched at slaughter  
Are shot to pieces by the shorter  
Poems of Donne.

Auden's "Under Which Lyre?" must have got explosive laughs from the returned veterans when he delivered the poem at the 1946 Harvard commencement.

Venturing into Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* back then could be instant Alice-in-the-Wild-Wood time, without even a pocketful of breadcrumbs to mark the trail.

### III

In 1967, Yvor Winters' *Forms of Discovery* would be another courage-to-read liberation for me.

The Sixties of all those big Names that got us all so excited, Burroughs, Genet, Sontag, Sade, Robbe-Grillet, the *Evergreen Review*, McLuhan, the *Voice* among them, wasn't good for poetry, at least not of the New Critical persuasion. It wasn't where the action, the energy, the challenges, the *voices* were.

Pound had called great poetry "simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree." Winters had spoken of "specific density."

He restored voices, voices energized from within and focused through form, including metre, that could hold their own in the clamorous bazaar.

Some of the poems that he praised were difficult. But the difficulties weren't a matter of allusions, any more than what Hamlet says during

his brief time on the boards sends us off into a search for the *real* Hamlet in the things that he *doesn't* say.

These were speech-acts and thinkings-through on the page and in the ear, not portals to the presumed Life-and-Thought of the poet behind the scenes.

Or to bigger hypothesized realities.

#### IV

Ideas indeed mattered. The thinking of individuals like Shaftesbury, Emerson, and Puritan divines mattered. But you engaged with them philosophically. They weren't period-privileged. They weren't The Way We Thought Then.

And you did history as history, not mind-candy. You didn't need to frequent the "period" theme-parks, with their figures in doublet-and-hose, and periwigs, and crinolines, and the sheep-dotted pastures, and poet-dotted hills, and the occasional mountain top on which to have sublime thoughts about the Soul and the Universe.

You didn't have to assimilate ideas assumed to pervade each so-called period like Febreze at an odor-conscious suburban housewarming.

You didn't need to be in awe of the magical powers ascribed to Symbol, Metaphor, and Imagination with a view to

—bridging the alleged impassable Kantian gap between Things-As-They-Really-and-Truly-Are and the mere sublunary world of flesh and blood and things you stubbed your toes on in the dark;

—proving that the GBTs (Great Big Truths) of poets were just as real and deserving of funding as those of bespectacled mathematicians, and smelly chemists, and strutting engineers with their slide-rules;

—impressing on those yawning jocks at the back of the class that they *needed* the instructor-priest out in front because on their own they wouldn't have spotted in a zillion years what profundities a single word in a sacred ("organic") text could contain.

And you felt, in Winters' presentation, the power of metered language as an intensification of normal speech patterns, and the falsity of the dichotomy of "poetry" and "prose."

I myself truly enjoyed a lot of the poems that he steered me to, without any sense of being laced up into a neoclassical spine-stiffener. As I said in a review-article for which I'd followed up his tips:

It would not be in any meaningful sense of the term a "narrow" anthology that would include such diverse poems as "Drink to me only," "The Birth of the Squire," "Rose Aylmer," "The Cricket," "A Valediction of My Name at the Window," "Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers" "Having this day my horse, my hand, my lance," "Repose of Rivers," "Epithalamium," "My Apish Cousins," the Tetrachordon sonnets, one or two of the early Cantos, and "To a Louse." (*Southern Review*, 1969)

## V

The seminar that I mentioned above, "Traditionalism and Experimentation in Poetry," which I started in 1971, and in which a lot of taping was done, was a further education for me.

By the end, twenty years later, we were touching on over four hundred poems in it, large and small, good and great and lousy, including ones by Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Laforgue, in Angel Flores' great anthology. And of course Poe. (Martin Reyto did a marvelous straight taping of "The Raven.") And, oh, lots of stuff.

The members did most of the talking, and there were some memorable pushbacks. Robert Watson, in a long and tautly argued paper, went hell-for leather after Winters on Hopkins. Catherine Addison, a lioness defending her Romantic cubs, announced after I'd read out condescendingly some stanzas from *In Memoriam* that it was the worst reading she'd ever heard.

After which I set to and did some self-educating about the seismic philosophical decades of high Romanticism.



## VI

In our own Nineties, I tried spelling out to myself what kinds of qualities, what Leavisian “felt life,” I was in fact responding to in various poems that I particularly enjoyed. I also did a bit of thinking about poetic language for some talks that I was invited to give at the University of Toronto.

In “Romanticism and Classicism,” T.E. Hulme contrasted the use of what he called architects’ curves with the drive of the serious artist to set down with pen or pencil *exactly* the lines that he sees or imagines.

The cumulative Introductions (no longer just “Poem, Alice; Alice, Poem”) that began with Brooks, Warren, and Purser’s *An Approach to Literature* (1936) can give the impression at times that everything of consequences about the art and craft of poetry, at least the metered kind, is now known professionally.

Fortunately, when you abandon the rhetoric of pedagogy and fumble your way into the interiors of poems and passages that you truly care for, this proves a delusion.

The results of some of my own fumlings are as follows. Each unit is self-sufficient, but the sequence is not random.

### **(a) Powers of Style**

A foray into the nature of what (following Leavis), I think of as poetic “grasp”, the linguistic textures that give you real-feeling movements of minds in a real-feeling physical world. I’m particularly interested in those transformative decades, 1880–1930.

### **(b) King Arthur and the Inchcape Rock**

Memory Lane initiations. Here are some things that I acquired at age ten, along with a shiny cup, by memorizing thirty-nine lines from *Idylls of the King* assigned for the annual recitation contest at my North London prep school, summer of 1939. With side trips of recollection into some other boyhood encounters with poetry during that decade.

### **(c) Personals**

Some of a group of plain-language pieces from 2003, in which I tried talking to myself about features that I found interesting in various poems.

These, like the book as a whole, are findings-out, rather than tidy thesis-statement-plus-evidence presentations of the found.

But they aren't, "Sex appears to me to have been problematical for T.S. Eliot, but of course that's just my personal opinion and I could be wrong." Or, "At first we are likely to see Eliot as a poet of uncomplicated hedonism, but when we look more closely..." Or, "I can't be objective about those mermaids of his, I'm afraid. I had an affair with one once and it ended badly."

Decades ago, Leavis said that serious literary discussion took the form of, "This is so, isn't it?" "Yes, but..." It could also of course be, "Not on your nelly," or, "Oh yes yes yes, Professor Podsnuffle, how right you are, as always." But in my opinion (though what does an "opinion" look like?), Leavis was right, and *ad rem* rather than *ad hominem* dialogue is possible, and limited agreements can be reached.

Neo-Nietzscheans who scare Granny with talk about Multi-Perspectivalism act as though when three persons are gathered together to discuss a poem, one of them will be a Scientologist, another a disciple of C.S. ("Mr. Christian") Lewis, and the third a Martian.

I don't think there were any Martians in my own department.

### **(d) A Bit about Meter**

I've largely managed to avoid technical terminology in the book, but with meter there's no escape. Acquiring the basic terms is not a constriction but a liberation, since it permits of more precise descriptions. And the impression of French verse that one's likely to pick up from the term "syllabic" is misleading.

### **(e) Among the Monuments**

An analysis of how, in a particular major poem, the syntax and the stanzaic structures are uncoupled from each other, with remarkable expressive results.

This article, like the poem, isn't a romp. There are parts where I can no longer, twenty years on, bring the necessary concentration to it myself. But its syntax is clear, and there are times, with important poetry, when "It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The hard ... is what makes it great." (Jimmy Dugan in *A League of Their Own*.)

After which come three pieces more concerned with theoretical matters—just some probings and generalizings, not "Theory," or *Théorie*, or whatever it no doubt impressively is in German.

### **(f) Vision and Analogy**

Among the things touched on here are Symbolism and the idea of genius.

### **(g) Winters, Leavis, and Language**

Linguistic sophistication way back when.

### **(h) Language and Being**

A ramble, ignoring boundary markers.

After which, a light finish.

### **(i) Lagniappe**

"A bit of dis, and a bit of dat, and some of dose over dere, and ..." (at which point the merchant in *Road to Morocco* boings Bob over the head with a pan, to Bing's amusement).

But seriously, folks ...

OK. So, define poetry.

Uh ... Uh ...

2013

## Powers of Style

Irish poets, learn your trade,  
Sing whatever is well made

W.B. Yeats

### 1. Quality and Form

#### I

The great Surrealist-influenced French director Georges Franju once told an interviewer that he didn't much care for the term "minor film." For him a successful film was never minor.

I like that.

When small works last and tens of thousands of large ones are forgotten except by the specialist—when Stephen Crane's four-page "An Episode of War" goes on living, and a four-hundred-page novel like his coeval Frank Norris's *The Pit* dies, and the four-line "Western Wind" still speaks to us across the centuries—something important is obviously going on.

And it isn't simply that perfection is easier within narrower limits, such as in Herrick's six-line "Whenas in silks my Julia goes," or Jerome Kern's "The Way You Look Tonight," or Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*, or the best thrillers, or lots of photographs.

#### II

A small work may not require the interminable pushing-a-loaded-wheelbarrow-along-a-plank-over-a-chasm-towards-a-mist concentration (Conrad's analogy) required for the creation of a *Nostromo*, a *Moby-Dick*, a *Paradise Lost*. And the writers of thrillers, or epigrams, or piano rags can build on a base of conventions and expectations, and have a largely non-adversarial relationship with their audience and with other makers of such works.

But if the number of small works that are successful is large, the number of outstanding ones is not. If legions of composers must have dreamed of writing another "Che faró" or "Yesterday," only Gluck and

Lennon-McCartney wrote them, just as there is only one Scott Joplin despite the feeling you sometimes have that almost anyone ought to be able to write a good piano rag.

And not only is there still only one Cartier-Bresson despite the millions of “moment” photographs. The handful of photographs that made him immortal are a statistically invisible percentage of the number of photographs that he himself took.

Anyone can do harmonies. But good tunes and great photo images don’t hang there for the picking—ones that bind things together, essentialize feelings, and stay good regardless of the medium. You can whistle Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” as well as his “Für Elise.”

As Ezra Pound points out in his still wonderfully readable *ABC of Reading*, melody “is furthest from anything the composer finds THERE, ready in nature, needing only direct imitation or copying.”

Cartier-Bresson’s greatest images, the greatness heavily dependent on faces—their evolved and culture-laden characters, their decisive-moment expressions—can still affect us in small newspaper reproductions.

It’s not as if taking photos were difficult, either. You just pucker up your eyes and click.

### III

Within their chosen limits, such works are indeed “charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree” (to borrow Pound’s phrase). The *aficionado* sets them mentally in a complex overlay with similar works and sees how they surpass them; sees them as doing with a classic perfection the kinds of things aspired to in those other works.

To commit yourself to a pattern, whether in a thriller or the kinds of photographs that you print without cropping or re-touching, or in an improvised jazz solo, or a poem, is to commit yourself—if you *are* committed—to limits and logics, and to the requirement that everything be functional, down to the smallest shadings and pausings.

It is also, when we are speaking of music and poetry, to get back to what Ernest Fenollosa, in *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, called “the fundamental reality of time.” Once you’ve

committed yourself and the reader/listener to going forward, you cannot call for a halt or time-out, or a second chance, or a change in the rules, any more than you can when embarked on a break in snooker.

#### IV

But what does success in such terms look like in poetry—not greatness, necessarily, but an individuating and value-charged goodness?

#### V

Well, years ago I asked the members of a composition class to write me an example of a compound-complex sentence, and next day one of them handed in, “The dog is cold because he is dead, and nothing we can do will ever make him warm again.” When I asked him, yes, he had indeed once had a dog that died. But he obviously hadn’t known that he was writing a prose poem.

Someone who had worked for the BBC recalled in print how when he was transcribing E. M. Forster’s seemingly so casual broadcast talks, he again and again found himself setting down the words that he “knew” were going to come next, only to realize that what Forster in fact said was better.

The student’s sentence (compound-complex in more than merely a grammatical sense) is a more poetical example of that kind of forking—forking, like when you are going along an unfamiliar path in the woods and the path forks.

And the pattern wherein you reach forward as you read (“The dog is cold because he—has been out all night?”; “And nothing we can do will ever—bring him back to life?”), only to feel immediately the rightness of what you find is a feature of a lot of good poetry.

#### VI

It is central, certainly, to all the pleasures and potencies of rhyme, when so much depends on the rhyme word’s *not* being the obvious word, the word that we ourselves would have put there—the simpler

rhyiming, say, of Chaucer's couplets in *The Canterbury Tales* in contrast to, as W.K. Wimsatt shows, the rhyiming of Pope upon different parts of speech (nine/dine, scan/Man), with heightened demands on the syntax.

Or rhyme words that come where we ourselves couldn't have produced one at all.

Problems have been set, problems have been solved, and that's always enjoyable. Personally I love Wendy Cope's condensation of *The Waste Land* into five limericks, beginning with:

In April one seldom feels cheerful;  
Dry stones, sun and dust make me fearful;  
Clairvoyants distress me,  
Commuters depress me—  
Met Stetson and gave him an earful.

At no point, when you embark on the sequence, can you guess what's coming next. But she sustains it flawlessly from stanza to stanza, with a particularly deft final stanza.

It all *has* to be deft, too, and display a real feeling for the original, otherwise she'd look out of her league and a bit of a vandal, like Mel Brooks odiously spoiling *The Bride of Frankenstein* for us by staying so close to the original images that you can't now watch the poignant episode of the Monster and the blind hermit without having Brooks' coarseness intrude.

And Cope's poem is good criticism in its way, making valid points about the *Weltschmerz* in that still extraordinary work, that Colisseum which no visitor to the city of twentieth-century poetry can miss or, once having seen it, forget.

So you can be light and serious at the same time, subject-matter-wise. As are the authors of a double-dactyl that has stayed in my mind from the Sixties, when Bobby Kennedy and the old-style Liberal Hubert Humphrey were contending for the Democratic presidential nomination

## VII

The double-dactyl is one of the very few poetic forms invented in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has strict requirements— a nonsensical first line, a name in the second line, a single word as the penultimate line, etc.

So,

Hippity-hoppity,  
Bobbity Kennedy  
Bounces up mountains  
And barrels down streams.  
Toodle-oo Huberty,  
Nothing beats puberty.  
Incontrovertibly  
Destiny screams.

Destiny screams! Brilliant. There suddenly, in place of the tired abstraction of destiny calling, are the screaming (bobbysoxer?) crowds of Bobby's fans, with a touch of the open-beaked American eagle, soaring imperially in those Western regions where Bobby was indeed mountain climbing and whitewater rafting.

The inevitable looming defeat of the old-style liberal warrior is made all the more galling by the casual knowingness of that "Toodle-oo" and the smooth sweep of the verse.

A funny poem, a skillful poem, a political poem, all together. Was it by John Hollander? Anthony Hecht (one of the two inventors of the form)?

## VIII

Limericks and double-dactyls and sonnets are closed forms.

When a form has a terminus and the readers know the rules, something has to happen within a specified number of lines.

Part of what gave the Petrarchan sonnet its long life was the suspense of wondering whether the poet could find the necessary two sets of four *good* rhymes in the octave, and the knowledge that something significant was going to have to happen after the eighth line, and that if



it didn't, as it doesn't in two or three of Milton's sonnets, there would have to be a good reason why.

(Paul Fussell speaks of Milton's "emotional enjambment," as well as the formal kind, and suggests that "there is always something in fixed forms that stimulates Milton to mild rebellion or to exhibitions of technical independence.")

"Closed" poems are speech-acts during a determinate period of time—time given form.

Wendy Cope's sequence, one limerick to a section, is a closed one, with the final limerick-stanza especially important, like the last line, the last *word* in a poem.

## IX

The 1890s were the great decade of closed forms in English, the decade when poets sought out the difficulties posed by ballades, sestinas, rondels, villanelles, and the like. Why was that?

Partly, no doubt, it was anti-Victorian "play," reaching back past the rather too Victorian and naughty-boy William Schwenk Gilbert to the relaxed Regency modes of Winthrop Mackworth Praed and Byron in *Don Juan*. Partly too, I imagine, it was a homage to France, above all to Verlaine, poet-saint of bohemian Paris as the century drew to its close.

But a *big* attraction for some poets, I'm sure, was that those forms, with their circularity and their strictly enforced repetition of rhyme words, *were not sonnets*.

They didn't require a sonnet-like progression to a serious truth, the truth of a complex poetic thinking-through—Shakespearean, Miltonic, Wordsworthian; above all, not Wordsworthian.

You didn't have to *arrive* somewhere. You could stay in a kind of stabilized present when it came to your "thought."

## X

Thomas Hardy wrote a lovely triolet, "Birds at Winter Nightfall," in the early 1900s. It should to be read aloud, so that you can feel the

snow-charged wind pulling you along, and then pulling you along again just when you think you can rest, and then the bleak drop-down at the end.

Around the house the flakes fly faster,  
And all the berries now are gone  
From holly and cotonea-aster  
Around the house. The flakes fly!—faster  
Shutting indoors that crumb-outcaster  
We used to see upon the lawn  
Around the house. The flakes fly faster,  
And all the berries now are gone.

You can see why Pound admired Hardy's poetry. That scene, that snow, that wind, those birds are *there*.

Hardy had obviously enjoyed quitting the pains of fiction-making after *Jude the Obscure*, with the need to keep creating inexorable progressions towards philosophically-charged conclusions.

In poetry he was free to relax and create his own nonce-forms, sometimes with difficult rules, sometimes binding several stanzas together with predetermined countdowns—five people becoming four becoming three, etc., as the years pass—or attending to his own inner-ear preference about the number of stanzas to a stanzaic poem. (Four comes up more often than is normal.)

## XI

A poet can get a lot of mileage out of the serious game, easiest to play in regular or regular-seeming verse, of lulling the reader into expecting one thing and then giving him/her another.

In W.B. Yeats' "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," after a run of balanced, spare, syntactical, iambic pairings, starting with

I know that I shall meet my fate  
Somewhere among the clouds above.  
Those that I fight, I do not hate;  
Those that I guard, I do not love,

we read how

A lonely impulse of delight  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds,

and into the poem, energized by the enjambment and that trochaic  
“Drove to” come the swirling patterns of World War One aerial  
dogfights.

Or, more lightly (with brother George’s lovely melody in mind), there  
was Ira Gershwin’s

Oh, sweet and lovely  
Lady be good,  
Lady be good  
To me.

So deft. The first line, as sung, seems just a pleased exclamation. But  
then it’s the lady who’s sweet and lovely. And she has to be good too.  
Except that, no, she has to be good to *him*. Which is to say, not “good”  
at all.

And how about the opening of *The Waste Land*?

April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing,  
Memory and desire, stirring,  
Dull roots with spring rain  
April kept us warm, covering  
Earth with forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.

After our mind’s ear has figured out the pattern of the first four lines,  
we assume as we embark in the fifth one, that there’s going to be a  
second run of three participles and a clinching rhyme with “rain,” only  
to have the seventh line simply drift along a bit and slow to a halt with  
the utterly unrhyming “tubers”?

## XII

You can build a whole poem with misdirection.

In Ezra Pound’s “Epitaphs”—two tiny Chinoiserie poems constituting  
a single five-line poem—the first line arouses expectations of a  
romantic continuation, probably stanzaic

Fu-I loved the high cloud and the hill,  
But then we get,  
Alas, he died of alcohol,  
with its metrical shortening and throwaway off-rhyme.  
So the second epitaph will presumably be a deflationary quasi- couplet too, won't it?

Wrong again. It isn't a couplet, it doesn't rhyme, and the third line, continuing the action in the second, takes us back out into romantic imaginings, and "Epitaphs" becomes a thing of sweet-sour poignancy—small, but beautiful.

And Li Po also died drunk.  
He tried to embrace a moon  
In the Yellow River.

### XIII

If you want to see a virtuoso playing of the game, here's the opening of Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar," from a year or two after "An Irish Airman":

I placed a jar [where? on a shelf?] in [no, maybe in a closet?]  
Tennessee [so, in a State]

But can you quite say that? Placed it *in* Tennessee? As if, syntactically, that big area of the map were something small, like whatever it is that you normally place things in.

Well, all right,

I placed a jar in Tennessee  
(And round it was ...

Was? Was what? Was something—was, perhaps, a group, a cluster, of something?

But no.

I placed a jar in Tennessee  
(And round it was) upon a hill.

So it's the jar that's round, and it's been placed on a hill. And?

It made the slovenly wilderness

All right, these are quatrains, as a preliminary eye-flick has intimated, and thus far these lines are metrically regular, so now what will we learn?

It made the slovenly wilderness

[Look even more untidy still?]

Fooled again, and more strangely, both formally and substantively, for,

It made the slovenly wilderness

Surround that hill.

With the odd flattening and muting of that repeated "hill" and four syllables gone missing, the energized jar makes the wilderness come to a stop around the hill, which now feels (like the jar) a round one.

#### XIV

Great literature, Pound said, is language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree. Small works, too, can have a high specific gravity, to borrow a term from Yvor Winters.

Hilaire Belloc's epigram

I'm tired of Love: I'm still more tired of Rhyme.

But Money gives me pleasure all the time

is a mildly amusing epigram, with its functional contrast between the slowed-down first line and the speeded-up second one.

But it's lightweight beside J.V. Cunningham's also "scandalous"

Lip was a man who used his head.

He used it when he went to bed

With his friend's wife, or with his friend,

With either sex, at either end.

At each stage there's a new misdirection, a new trap sprung.

He was a sensible sort of guy, well, not quite, he was the kind of person who would be reading or thinking in bed, well, no, actually he

was the slick seducer of a friend's wife, well, no, hmm! he'd slept with the friend *too*, and not just one couple (that "or"), and, well—well, evidently he was using his head more literally than the first line suggested.

These various meanings don't cancel each other out, either.

## XV

As Franju said to another interviewer, "Un plan doit avoir un contenu comme un verre," a shot should have a content like a filled glass.

In some movies, each shot is so charged with visual information that you haven't fully assimilated it before you have to move on to the next one, so that the movie seems longer than its actual running time.

There's a bit of that density in Cunningham's epigram

Deep sorrow and time pauses. Sorrow wastes  
To a new sorrow. While time heals time hastes.

Some short or small works, Paul Klee's, Borges', and Anton von Webern's among them, are in effect condensations, given the hovering presence in them of the longer works that the artist *could* have made but chose not to (as Vladimir Nabokov's tedious inflation of a Borges-like conceit in *Pale Fire* reminds us).

And a constellation of small works can amount to a weightier larger one—Cunningham's *A Century of Epigrams*, for example, or the pieces in Kafka's *Meditation*, or *Sergeant Pepper*.

## XVI

When everything miraculously goes right in a work, large or small, as it does in that famous Zen ink-wash drawing of the five perfectly placed persimmons, we partake of fullness, an enduring physical but more than merely physical thereness *in* the world, an incarnate act of looking.

God is indeed in the details.

But that interfacing, that interpenetration of work and "world," deserves a closer look.

## 2. Concreteness

### XVII

In the style-shift that began in the early nineteen-hundreds, craft and skill weren't in the service of mere play, despite their dandyish play-like use at times.

They were related, to the felt imperative (deriving essentially from Flaubert, and manifest in Henry James, Stephen Crane, and Conrad, with Ford Madox Ford as their standard-bearer) to "show" rather than "tell," and to a recoil from abstract terms and cliché phrases into which the reader pours the pre-mixed notions that he or she brings to the poems

Art, said Yeats,

bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrinks from what Blake calls mathematic form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body.

And we remember Stephen Dedalus' scornful reference to "All those big words that make us all so unhappy," and Hemingway's comparable distaste for them, especially the big ones, the calls of Duty and Honour and bleeding ravished Civilization, that had been so important a part of the patriotic rhetoric of the Great War.

T.E. Hulme's voiced fondness for "the dry hardness which you get in the classics," and his conviction that "the great aim is accurate, precise and definite description" carried a lot of weight.

But the abstract/concrete dichotomy may not be altogether neat and tidy. And concreteness may not be, well, as *concrete* as it sounds.

### XVIII

A statement like "I feel so unhappy," set down out of context on the page, is indeed abstract, and wouldn't acquire a charge of expressive meaning—a report on a "real" inner state—simply by being in a piece of verse.

But it might be very moving when made in the quavering voice of an old woman in conversation—an old woman, not normally given to self-pity, who is telling a visitor that she’s been refused permission to take her old dog with her to a retirement home.

The spoken word isn’t necessarily more expressive than the written, and when you try recording poems for the first time in what you feel is a particularly sincere and expressive fashion, you are likely to be shocked by how flat you sound.

But speech, actual situational speech, can indeed be informed by a whole repertoire of stressings, pausings, and timbres, so that the words, “I never gave him any money” can have over a dozen distinct meanings, depending on where the stresses fall.

The old lady is *displaying* unhappiness, not merely reporting on it. Unhappiness is *there*, concretely, in the whole run of the words as she speaks them.

## XIX

In the modernist style-shift driven by Hulme, and Pound, and Ford, and codified a bit later by F.R. Leavis, we see a concern with achieving that kind of concreteness.

Statements like “A poet *could not but* be gay,/ In such a jocund *company*” and “And then my *heart* with *pleasure* fills...” are pretty abstract, aren’t they?

But the daffodils are *there* in the first two stanzas of Wordsworth’s “Daffodils,” with their energizing verbs, their opening spaces inviting the gazing eye, and the dramatic shift from “Fluttering and dancing in the breeze” to:

Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the Milky Way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margin of a bay....

We don’t just read the word “daffodils” and fill it up with whatever our own sense of those flowers may be.



## XX

In a good deal of bad nineteenth-century poetry, as viewed through Fenollosan or Poundian or Hulmean eyes, language collapsed into clusters of linguistic tokens, each presumed to exist in a one-to-one relationship with something real and already *known* out there.

Like “a poet.” Or his “heart.” Or “pleasure.”

The modernist emphasis on active verbs was a shift towards people and things *doing* things, and away from one-to-one concepts like “a poet,” etc.

It was a shift from “I am very *skeptical* about his *ability* to bring it to *completion*” to, “I bet he doesn’t finish it.”

## XXI

In the process, verbs themselves become less reified, too. When we read the opening lines of Yeats’s “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death”—

I know that I shall meet my fate  
Somewhere among the clouds above;

we don’t start asking epistemological questions about what it means to “know” something, any more than we do when someone says, “I just *know* he’s going to be late.”

We know the relative weights that the words have in ordinary speech, the kind of speech that’s actually spoken.

And how verbs work can have its bearing on the “classicism” that is the nominal antithesis of, or corrective to, “romanticism.”

## XXII

Almost all good short poems are strong in verbs. It is what gives them their charge of meaning and anchors them, while permitting the right kinds of openings-up to go on, the kind that lead us back into the physical, but more than *merely* physical, world.

Limericks, those sociable *haiku* of Anglophone society, are about things and people *doing* things, so that we are led through start-to-finish sequences of action.

Some of the best epigrams are informed by actions:

“When good Americans die, they go to Paris.”  
‘And where do bad Americans go?’  
‘They go to America.’”

Oscar Wilde

If you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.

Friedrich Nietzsche

You ask me how Contempt who claims to sleep  
With every woman that has ever been  
Can still maintain that women are skin deep?  
They never let him any deeper in.

J.V. Cunningham

In his admirable book on Baudelaire, Martin Turnell observes that “The verb is the pivot of Baudelaire’s poetry. The predominance of the verb is essentially a classical trait....”

And T.E. Hulme’s famously influential “Romanticism and Classicism,” ca 1912, was a summons away from what he saw as the vaporous, the emptily idealist side of Romanticism. It was an effort to ground poetic discourse in recognizable human experiences.

But here, too, there isn’t a tidy antithesis.

### XXIII

By and large, the kinds of poems we tend to call classical are indeed about people, including individuals who may themselves be romantic, doing things in a recognizable human society.

Like Fu I and Li Po. Like Yeats’ Irish-volunteer World War One airman.

But the poetry of the poetically unclassical Eliot, like that of Yeats, is also a-buzz with action.

Women *come* and *go*, the Thames *sweats* oil and tar, the tiger *springs* in the new year, the leaves *clutch* and *sink* into the wet bank.

And when the American orientalist Ernest Fenollosa reported that “I had to discover for myself why Shakespeare’s English was so immensely superior to all others. I found that it was his persistent, natural, and magnificent use of hundreds of transitive verbs”, he was testifying to a more than merely personal shift in awareness.

## XXIV

What I’ve been talking about is a stylistic base-line that makes it possible to say real-world things plainly when you want to, like “In the room the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo,” or, “They flee from me, that sometime did me seek/ With naked foot, stalking in my chamber,” or “Le vent se lève! ... Il faut tenter de vivre!”

But once that grounding is established, more abstract words, particularly Latinate ones, can resume some of their musculature, their kinaesthetic energy, so that those *multitudinous* seas of Macbeth’s great soliloquy are as splendidly there for us as the *mackerel-crowded* seas of Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium.”

## XXV

It is customary to say that Germanic words in English are more concrete than Latinate ones, and so in a sense they are.

But it isn’t mere pretentiousness, or a desire for the aureate, that makes us say at times that we’ll “investigate” a problem, rather than “look into” it, or elucidate something, rather than throw some light on it.

Latinate words tend to be more *extensive* with respect to space and time than Germanic ones, implying more permanence or finality; as in the difference between *exterminating* and *killing off*, or *a lot* of food and an *abundance* of it.

And if we think of an investigation as taking more time and being more complicated than a looking into, it is because, even if we have

never turned to a dictionary to find out why, the way in which “investigate” has been used has implicitly acknowledged and preserved its own grounding in action.

To investigate—*in-vestigare*—is to be on the track of something; following up a trail—perhaps a winding or fading trail, not always easy to read, requiring pausings, interpretings, renewed momentum, *persistence*.

A stretch of poetry containing few or no Latinate prefixes and suffixes, such as the first stanza of Wyatt’s “They Flee from Me,” or the first stanza of Hardy’s “The Voice”—

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,  
Saying that now you are not as you were  
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,  
But as at first, when our day was fair.—

is likely to be very specific and local.

## XXVI

In his essay on the Chinese written character, Fenollosa talks about how you can still discern basic physical activities in ideograms—“see” the man walking or the moon behind the tree. It was a notion that much impressed Pound, and apparently, once you get beyond the simplest elements, untrue.

But just as Fenollosa, coming to the Chinese language from the outside, “saw” things that are lost in modern Chinese in the compound ideogram, so an erudite and sensitive Chinese scholar might marvel at the rich metaphorical bases of our own Latinate compounds.

And English poetry benefited considerably from a new alertness to the musculature of words, whether or not manifested in a sustained interest like that of Gerard Manley Hopkins in philology and folk locutions.

## XXVII

So we see in some of the classics of modern poetry what we have in Shakespeare in conjoinings like “the slings and arrows of *outrageous* fortune,” or,

No, this my hand will rather  
The *multitudinous* seas *incarnadine*,  
Making the green *one red*,—

conjoinings in which the Latinate words, when they enter, are working to the full stretch of their powers.

Note, for example, how Hardy’s “In Time of ‘The Breaking of Nations’” (“Only a man harrowing clods/ In a slow silent walk”) builds to the drama of “Yet these [the whispering maid and her wight] will go onward the same/ Though *Dynasties* pass.”

Or how in that cunning poem of rhyme-and-syntax misdirections and thwartings of expectations, Wallace Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar” —

I placed a jar in Tennessee,  
And round it was, upon a hill.  
It made the slovenly wilderness  
Surround that hill—

builds to the pounce and flare of “It took *dominion* everywhere.”

## XXVIII

In this kind of writing, metaphors and similes become more firmly linked to the physical reality of beings and things in action, with a sharpened sense of the differences between figurative and literal statements.

Here, for example, is the octave of Hopkins “Spring,” much the best part of the poem (as is mostly the case in his sonnets):

Nothing is so beautiful as spring—  
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;  
Thrush’s eggs look little low heavens, and thrush  
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring  
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;

The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush  
The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush  
With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

There is only one “is” there. For the rest, things are shooting, looking, echoing, rinsing, wringing, striking, brushing, descending, racing, and having their fling.

But it is all *controlled* energy.

When the blurred familiar idiom of having a fling is re-energized so that we can feel those lambs gamboling, it’s because of the linguistic scrupulousness leading up to it.

The weeds aren’t engaging in pyrotechnics. They’re growing up through the spokes of old cartwheels lying in farmyards, which I’ve seen myself (though it was years before I recalled this).

Thrushes’ eggs are pale blue as well as rounded, and the nests (as Google informs me) are usually placed close to the ground, so that you can feel the act of peering down onto them and the comparison suggesting itself.

The metaphor of your hearing being cleansed has been freshened into the more tactile “rinse,” which has been further energized by the addition of “wring,” as in wringing out, with overtones also of bell-like tones and the wringing of your heart.

“Lightnings,” plural, loosens the conventional “like lightning” and gives you, instead, a flickering series of aural (electric?) shocks.

And though I can’t vouch for whether the leaves of peartrees are shiny, I know that one summer when I was sitting in the little front yard of our summer rental in Provence and glanced upwards, the rim of the little tree there did indeed appear to be touching the deep blue of the sky and, because of the downward curve of its line, made the sky itself seem to be moving downwards.

The other day I mentioned this effect to my friend Joyce Stevenson when we were sitting near a tree in her back yard. She saw it too.

No wonder Leavis, for whom Shakespeare’s mature language was the English language at its fullest, would give the English Hopkins equal

billing with the American Eliot and Pound in his *New Bearings in English Poetry*, and return to him in several articles.

I was pleased to discover for myself, happening upon their use elsewhere, that the fireplace that goes “black out” in Yeats’ “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” and the swans that “climb the air” in “The Wild Swans at Coole” were Irish idioms, not Yeats’ private coinages.

### XXIX

All of this makes it easier to be clear about the “purifying of the language of the tribe” (Eliot’s phrase) that Pound and Eliot and others were engaged in.

It wasn’t a question of choosing between “concretions” (a mere thinginess of separate objects) and “abstractions,” or of eschewing generalizations, or of opting, in the old cliché way, for the “classical” over the “romantic.”

### XXX

Be wary of generalizations—of course. Particularly if one has become weary of the ex-cathedra pronouncements of the Big Victorians.

Every reader of detective fiction like Conan Doyle’s, and G.K. Chesterton’s, and Dashiell Hammett’s knows the dangers of premature categorizing.

One of Chesterton’s best-known Father Brown stories turns on the repeated assertion by witnesses that no-one had gone into a block of flats on a particular morning. In fact a mailman had, or rather, the murderer pretending to be a mailman had, but they simply hadn’t “seen” him as a person.

And if the anonymous head of the Op’s detective agency noticed rain falling outside the window, he would concede only that it *appeared* to be raining—presumably, said the Op, on the off-chance that someone upstairs was pouring water down.

Hammett himself went further than Hemingway in his pursuit of objectivity. In two whole novels, *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Glass*

*Key*, we are never told how a character “felt” or “thought” but only what they did and said—the movements of their mouths, eyes, and so forth.

Which makes *The Maltese Falcon* almost unreadably mannered in places.

### XXXI

However, there are generalizations and generalizations.

Some generalizations, like the old lady’s “I feel so unhappy,” more or less *sit* there, needing to be exemplified—“Earth hath not anything to show more fair,” “Nothing is so beautiful as spring,” “April is the cruelest month,” the first two being the kinds of cliché exclamations that could be used in ads, the third at least having the shock of strangeness so that you wait for more.

And all three do indeed get memorably developed.

But you can also have generalizations that are more or less free-standing, by virtue of their definiteness and their charge of information.

### XXXII

Again and again, Baudelaire’s poems open with powerful generalizations, or with formulations (adjectival, adverbial) that are themselves generalizations.—“La sottise, l’erreur, le péché, la lesine,/ Occupent nos esprits et travaillent nos corps” (“Folly, error, sin, nigardliness/ Possess our souls and exercise our bodies”) “Fourmillant cité, cité plein de rêves” (“Swarming city, city full of dreams”), “Ma jeunesse ne fût qu’un ténébreux orage,/ Traversé çà et là par des brillants soleils” (“My youth was just a shadowy storm,/ Crossed here and there by shining suns”).

And at times they achieve an almost unbearable poignancy of non-figurative truth-telling, as in the opening stanza of “Le Voyage”:

Pour l’enfant, amoureux de cartes et d’estampes,  
L’univer et égal à son vaste appétit.  
Ah! que le monde est grand à la clarté des lampes!



Aux yeux du souvenir que le monde est petit.

[To the child, in love with maps and pictures,  
The universe is vast as his appetite.  
Ah how immense the world is by lamplight!  
How small the world is in recollection.]

Tr. Barbara Gibbs

Shakespeare's sonnets rarely open with self-contained first lines of generalization. Nor, mostly, do Hardy's greatest poems ("He does not think that I haunt here nightly," "Hereto I come to view a voiceless ghost," etc).

### XXXIII

Yeats, on the other hand, matured into one of the great poetic masters of confident generalizations—"Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,/It's with O'Leary in the grave," "Too long a sacrifice/ Can make a stone of the heart," "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ Are full of passionate intensity," etc—and of collocations like "the desolation of reality.

Eliot didn't do badly, either, Bartlett-wise, with "April is the cruelest month," and "This is the way the world ends,/ Not with a bang but a whimper," and his pre-conversion crack in "The Hippopotamus" about how "God works in a mysterious way—/ The Church can sleep and feed act once," and the sonorous passage in "Gerontion" about the "cunning passages" and "contrived corridors" of History.

Plus the later asseverations of *Four Quartets*, most powerfully in the Dante-esque passage in *Little Gidding* in which the *Doppelgänger* visitant warns the autobiographical speaker of what may await him in his socially distinguished old age, including

the rending pain of re-enactment  
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame  
Of motives late revealed and the awareness  
Of things ill done and done to others' harm  
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.

Off-hand, I can't think of any obvious Bartletts by Pound, except the dramatic-monologue "Damn it all. All this our South stinks peace" and

“What thou lov’st well remains. The rest is dross” from the *Pisan Cantos*.

And what do we have, generalization-wise, from William Carlos Williams?

But of course there’s always Robert Frost.

So you can see what was at issue, and the kinds of things that Pound and Eliot, both of them strongly Francophile, were getting at with respect to language in their Mallarméan concern to “purify the language of the tribe” (Eliot’s phrase in the *Little Gidding* passage).

### XXXIV

The real objection to a pseudo-Baudelarian fin-de-siècle passage like W. E. Henley’s

The Wind-Fiend, the abominable—  
The Hangman Wind that tortures temper and light—  
Comes slouching, sullen and obscene,  
Hard on the skirts of the embittered night

is not that it is abstract but it is falsely concrete.

It not only falsifies the wind (can you *feel* a wind there? feel it on your face or up under your coat).

It also falsifies the hangman, in contrast to Baudelaire’s beggars. Public executioners, like “heroic” nineteenth-century surgeons, had dignity, being (as Elias Canetti interestingly explains in *Crowds and Power*) the figures whom *everyone* feared.

And the passage contrasts with the actual Baudelairean concreteness of personification at the outset of “Au Lecteur,” the poem whose final line Eliot lifted into *The Waste Land* from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, that major book of the modern city.

La sottise, l’erreur, le péché, la lésine,  
Occupent nos esprits et travaillent nos corps,  
Et nous alimentons nos aimables remords,  
Comme les mendiants nourrissent leur vermine.

[Ignorance, error, cupidity, and sin

Possess our souls and exercise our flesh;  
Habitually we cultivate remorse  
As beggars entertain and nurse their lice.

Tr. Stanley Kunitz

### XXXV

Likewise, the real objection to some of those much-honoured Romantic generalizations like Shelley's "Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart/ And come, for some uncertain moment lent," or Keats's, "The weariness, the fever, and the fret/ Here, where men sit and hear each other groan" is not that they are self-pitying but that they are experientially so thin.

What they look bad beside is not "affirmative" generalizations about the human condition, but what we have in William Dunbar's reverberant fifteenth-century "Lament for the Makaris" in lines like:

Our plesance here is all vain glory,  
This fals world is but transitory,  
The flesh is bruckle, the Feynd is slee:—  
*Timor mortis conturbat me.*

As he calls the roll of the dead poets, the makers, we do indeed feel the feebleness of the flesh, *our* flesh, and the speaker's fear of death—and of possible damnation.

And so we do, more complexly, when Thomas Nashe's sixteenth-century "In Time of Pestilence" tells us how:

Wit with his wantonness  
Tasteth death's bitterness;  
Hell's executioner  
Hath no ears for to hear  
What vain art can reply.  
I am sick, I must die.  
Lord, have mercy on us.

There are no Henleyesque melodramatics *there*. Nor is it merely "period" poetry. This is for real, just as the greatest poetry of fifteenth-century François Villon is still for real.

In the kinaesthetic slowing-down of the second line that's required for proper enunciation ("tasteth death's bitterness") and its contrast with the tripping first one ("Wit with his wantonness"), we are drawn towards the sensations of the sick mouth, as Leavis was drawn towards the sensations of the well one in his impression of teeth biting into an apple as you read of those "mossed cottage trees" in Keats' "To Autumn."

And with the syntactical surge forward of the subsequent sentence ("Hell's executioner/ Hath no ears for to hear/ What vain art can reply"), we have an opening up into actual executions.

For the executioner implacably carrying out his official task, you're simply there as a generalized object, not as your about-to-be-annihilated, and intensely conscious, individual self.

That's concreteness.

### XXXVI

An important part of Pound's and Eliot's linguistic self-education had come from the great, and greatly kinaesthetic, French poetry of Rimbaud, Laforgue, and Corbière, with its resemblances to the older poetry in English that I've just mentioned—and the resemblances of *that* to what we have in the pre-classical Villon, as in his great ballade of the hanged men, with lines like,

Quant de la chair que trop avons nourrie  
Elle est pieça devoré et pourrie  
Et nous les os devenons cendre et poudre  
De nostre mal personne ne s'en rie  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre

[As for the flesh we loved too well  
A while ago it was eaten and has rotted away  
And we the bones turn to ashes and dust  
Let no one make us the butt of jokes  
But pray God that he absolves us all.

Galway Kinnell

You are *there*. You're grounded—well, figuratively.

## XXXVII

As you are in Rimbaud's sonnet "Au Cabaret Vert," quoted admiringly by Pound in his major 1918 essay on French poetry.

Is it "romantic"? "classical"? Either? Neither? Both?

Depuis huit jours, j'avais déchiré mes bottines  
Au cailloux des chemins. J'entrais à Charleroi,  
—*Au Cabaret Vert*: je demandai des tartines  
Du beurre et de jambon qui fût à moitié froid.

Bienheureux, j'allongeai les jambes sous la table  
Verte: je contemplai les sujet tres naifs  
De la tapisserie—Et ce fut adorable,  
Quand la fille aux tétons énormes, aux yeux vifs,

—Celle-là, ce n'est pas un baiser qui l'épeure!—  
Rieuse, m'apporta des tartines de beurre,  
Du jambon tiède, dans un plat colorié,

Du jambon rose et blanc parfumé d'une gousse  
D'ail,—et m'emplit la chope immense, avec sa mousse  
Que dorait un rayon de soleil arriéré.

[For a whole week I had ripped up my boots on the stones of the roads. I walked into Charlerois—into the Green Inn; I asked for some slices of bread and butter, and some half-cooked ham.

Happy, I stuck out my legs under the green table: I studied the artless patterns of the wallpaper—and it was charming when the girl with the huge breasts and lively eyes,

—a kiss wouldn't scare that one!—smilingly brought me some bread and butter and lukewarm ham, on a coloured plate;—

pink and white ham, scented with a clove of garlic—and filled my huge beer mug, whose froth was turned into gold by a ray of late sunshine.]

Tr. Oliver Bernard

"The actual writing of poetry," Pound observed, "has advanced little or not at all since Rimbaud."

### XXXVIII

To find an equivalent in English back then to the verb-propelled charge of recalled experience in “Au Cabaret Vert,” with its total unrhetorical at-homeness with itself, you would probably have had to turn to some of the poems of Hardy or Edward Thomas, or else reach back to Wyatt’s “They Flee from Me.”

And it’s a better poem than “Daffodils.” And a movingly tranquil recollecting of a moment of tranquillity in a far from tranquil young life.

In it we have passed through a series of forkings in which at the outset what might be a social-realist narrative (those boots, those roads) modulates into what might be a sexual encounter, only to arrive at the comfort after effort, the young warrior’s repose of garlic-scented ham and a huge mug of beer with the late afternoon sun shining through the foam.

And all this with a casual, virtuosic observance of the rules of sonnet rhyming while employing his comfortably relaxed own syntax.

If there’s hell in the Villon passage, there’s a bit of Heaven in the Rimbaud.

Without any assistance from “fancy.” or, in the picturesque sense, “romance.” There’s nothing there in the poem that isn’t *there*.

### XXXIX

So perhaps in the end “concreteness,” and “substantiality,” and Leavis’ “felt life” are those of the experiencing consciousness in each particular successful poem, its mode of coping and *being*—being in the world, to borrow Heidegger’s term.

And it’s there for us because of the linguistic features (and others) that I have talked about, and not because of what we “know” about the poet from other poems by him or her, or other kinds of writing by her or him—diaries, letters, and so forth—, or writing about him/her by contemporaries, searching through which is akin to the doomed quest for the fully explanatory key text by the scholar-critics adrift in Borges’ Library of Babel.

### 3. Vision and Craft

#### XL

The changes that I have been talking about were in part a way of coping with an epistemological problem lurking in high Romanticism.

#### XLI

The problem, as formulated by Kant (who was not himself a Romantic), was that there was indeed a Reality out there, the way things really are, but you couldn't attain to it by the normal processes of ratiocination, which is to say achieve a connection with the real that was independent of the processes of rational enquiry, including concepts like space, time, and causality.

But if, in the offered solutions of Fichte (whose *Science of Knowledge* reads like Spinoza on acid) and, adapting him, Schelling and Coleridge, the world is a unity in which substance and spirit are one, like a coin with two sides, or a growing plant

—and if some individuals, true “poets,” possessed the godlike gift of an instantaneous apprehension of wholes in which ostensible opposites—inner/outer, spirit/substance, love/justice, and so forth—were reconciled

—and if they could embody those perceptions in poems that were themselves organic wholes, well, reality was back in business, with metaphors and symbols—truly poetic ones, not mere compressed similes—as its principle agents of synthesis.

And if the “inspiration,” to use that old-fashioned term, welled up from within rather than being injected from outside, so much the better, since it allowed you to have a religious sense of the universe without the network of obligations of formal Christianity.

You could listen to your “self,” that deep and more-than-merely personal human self and attend to its revelations and mandates in the conviction that what you were seeing was indeed *there*.

And this authenticity made it easier to resist the dispiriting claims of mechanistic science, with its devaluing of individual consciousness.

## XLII

It was a bit like Calvinism, though. You might be one of the elect, but you never knew for sure that you were.

And the greatness of the achievements of “geniuses” like Shakespeare, and Goethe, and Dante in whom the world spirit became most fully conscious of itself—the biggest blossoms on the stems, as it were—set standards that it was very difficult to live up to.

And visionary power, the kind that could indeed make you feel that no-one had seen in that fashion before, like “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and the very great poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin, did not always come when called.

So writing poems was liable to become (after the example of Wordsworth in his endlessly self-congratulatory *Prelude*) an affirmation that you, too, had poetic experiences. And reading, whether by you or others, become in part a search for assurances that you were the real thing—or for symptoms indicating that you weren’t.

And would-be visionary stimulants like laudanum (opium dissolved in alcohol) and, a little later, hashish didn’t, once addiction had set in, deliver on their promises of transcendence.

And crashes and burn-outs, with or without drugs, occurred, Hölderlin’s among them.

And if you lost faith in the poetic enterprise, you could find yourself empathizing with one of the characters in Villiers de l’Isle Adam’s Symbolist play *Axel* (1886) who says,

“Do realize, once and for all, that there is no other universe for you but the very conception of it reflected at the back of your mind; for you can neither see it fully, nor know it, nor even perceive one single point of it as that mysterious point must be in its reality... . Appearance, such as it may be, is, in principle, merely illusory, shifting, fallacious, and elusive.” (tr. June Guicharnaud)

It was that kind of perception that had struck the twenty-four-year-old Stéphane Mallarmé twenty years before with paralyzing force, a paralysis from which he freed himself by foregrounding, with increasing ingenuity, the *crafting* of poems.



### XLIII

The renewed interest in “making,” the consciousness of figurative language as arising out of a matrix of common speech, and the growing importance of a concreteness that involved more than just a “soft” interiority interfacing with “hard” externals made the writing of poetry a less lonely business. Everything did *not* have to depend on the hard-won world-view of the individual.

### XLIV

Articulating values could be, in part a discernment of relationships out there *in* the organic world, and no less meaningful on that account.

The spring that Hopkins celebrates in the octave of “Spring” pulses in its own terms. The lambs are lambs, not stained-glass bearers of pennants with “Innocent” on them. The thrush is an ear-cleansing caller, a protector of eggs, a creator, not an embodiment of Wordsworthian and Shelleyan messages. Even the kestrel of “The Windhover” is an evoked real bird in the octave, there in the rhythmic ebb and flow of the lines as they enact

his riding  
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there....

The “ordinary,” the everyday, the taken for granted could be revived by a more intent looking.

Rimbaud’s “Au Cabaret Vert” is doing so much more than simply saying, “I stopped by a pub and had a couple of ham sandwiches and a glass of beer.” And Rilke’s “Ripe apple, pear and banana” in *Sonnets to Orpheus* is a particularly lovely evocation of the “simple” experience of taking fruit into the mouth.—in David Young’s translation, “Something nameless/slow, a flood of discoveries/startled loose from the flesh of the fruit.”

The poem culminates in “O Ehrfahrung, Fühlung, Freude—*riesig*.” (“Oh experience, sensation, happiness—*immense*.”)

## XLV

Moreover, the celebrations could accommodate some of the opposites of high Romanticism, by means of intelligent reasoning, not the mysterious workings of the Imagination.

Wallace Stevens' great meditation in "Sunday Morning," beginning with the unforgettable green cockatoo on that calm sunny morning, and full of the fruits and beauties of the earth, is also informed by the recognition that certain kinds of transcendence aren't possible.

But the incomparable naturalistic conclusion isn't a melancholy turning away from illusion. Nature, here, in this vision of plenitude on a generous continent, is the doings of creatures going in a *more* real fashion about their business. The berries are ripening. The pigeons will rise again with the morning's light.

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail  
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;  
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;  
And in the isolation of the sky,  
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make  
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,  
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

And of course Valéry's "Le Cimetière Marin" is *the* great pondering of the presence of death in life, as a natural process. It is a pondering in which he maximizes both the energies of death and those of here-and-now Being in this Provençal landscape of sun, and sea, and fruits, and warm dry earth, and the sound of crickets, ending famously with:

Le vent se lève...il faut tenter de vivre!  
L'air immense ouvre et referme mon livre,  
La vague en poudre ose jaillir des rocs!  
Envoles-vous, pages tout éblouies!  
Rompez, vagues! Rompe d'eaux réjouies  
Ce toit tranquille où picoraient des focs!

[The wind is rising!... We must try to live!  
The huge air opens and shuts my book: the wave  
Dares to explode out of the rocks in reeking  
Spray. Fly away, my sun-bewildered pages!  
Break, waves! Break up with your rejoicing surges

This quiet roof where sails like doves were pecking.]

Tr. Cecil Day Lewis

## XLVI

The firming-up of real-world experiences, and their detachment from a Beyond from which they were presumed to derive their authority, made easier the construction of larger symbolic systems

—by Yeats and Pound with their constellations of value-charged individuals and episodes,

—by Lawrence in his multiple explorings as poet, novelist, dramatist, essayist, psychologist, travel writer, literary critic.

—by André Breton in the intricate cultural cross-fertilizings of Surrealism,

—by Rilke and Stevens in ways that, alas, are mostly closed to me conceptually,

Implicit in most of this was the Nietzschean recognition that so-called transcendent values were extrapolations from, and symbolic configurations of, this-world ones—and none the worse for that.

If the Last Supper embodied values, it was partly because feasts in general did, whether in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or *To the Lighthouse*, or (more recently) Nan Goldin's lovely photo of five friends picnicking on the grass beside the River Charles.

## XLVII

And organicity came to have more definable aspects, making it more than a matter of subject and origins.

With further implications for the nature of the poetic self, and of more than merely poetic self-hood.

#### 4. Organicism (1)

#### XLVIII

As I have suggested, part of the drama of closed-form poems lies in departures from a prescribed, or path-of-least-resistance, regularity, The privately *felt* has not been denied utterance by the public rules.

And part of what makes stanzaic poems dramatic is the departure at the start of each stanza from how the preceding one opens and closes.

#### XLIX

The opening of Yeats' "The Wild Swans at Coole" is lovely in its "objective" precision:

The trees are in their autumn beauty;  
The woodland paths are dry.  
Under the October twilight the autumn  
Mirrors a still sky.  
Upon the brimming water, among the stones,  
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

Where will the poem go next? Presumably (since we're creatures of habit, however recently established our expectations) into a further run of precise description.

But no, instead there's the lift-off into wider space and time, including interior space, and energized, characteristically, by the verbs, with

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me,  
Since I first made my count...

And the first of those two lines, "The nineteenth autumn" —pause —"has come upon me," with its extra syllable, and the almost equal disyllabic weighting of "nineteenth," moves more slowly than "The trees are in their autumn beauty."

The stanza goes on from there, and the stanzas go on shifting like that.

Yeats had made himself into a master of that kind of thing,

I talk about some other stanzaic poems, in "Personals.

## L

And the same principles apply with free verse, though the units are likely to be less definite and the contrasts milder.

## LI

When we embark on the second stanza of Pound's "Epitaphs," for example, we expect (having, we think, however subliminally, grasped the operative convention in the opening couplet) that we'll again have a "lofty" line about some other character, corresponding to "Fu-I loved the high cloud and the hill," which will then be undercut in the way that "Alas, he died of alcohol"

Instead we get, "And Li Po also died drunk," and then the further reversal of direction that I spoke of earlier on.

Pound's early stanzaic poems lack the Yeatsian kind of progression, however, and impeccable though his phrasing could be in small free-verse units, the poems in *Lustra* and *Cathay* are predominantly, like "Epitaphs," either an unbroken flow or in two parts, with a difference in tone between the two.

Which can be charming, as in Pound's "The Lake Isle," playing off Yeats' much-anthologized one.

O God, O Venus, O Mercury, patron of thieves,  
Give me in due time, I beseech you, a little tobacco-shop,  
With the little bright boxes  
    Piled up neatly upon the shelves  
And the loose fragrant Cavendish  
    And the shag,  
And the bright Virginia  
    Loose under the bright glass cases,  
And a pair of scales not too greasy,  
And the whores dropping in for a word or two in passing,  
For a flip word, and to tidy their hair a bit.

O God, O Venus, O Mercury, patron of thieves,  
Lend me a little tobacco-shop,  
    Or install me in any profession  
Save this damn'd profession of writing,

Where one needs one's brain all the time.

Lovely, the contrast between the inspired "For a flip word, and to tidy their hair a bit" and the reiterated, "O God, O Venus, O mercury, patron of thieves," with again, as in "Epitaphs," an unbalancing and the second stanza *not* going in the direction that the reiteration suggests.

But in *Cathay* it is only in the flawless "The River Merchant's Wife" that you have a start-to-finish flow, right at every point, of distinctive and individually memorable units. The longer and ostensibly richer and weightier "Exile's Letter," which Yeats included in his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, is a virtually unbroken flow that's hard to hold in the mind.

The superiority of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and *Homage to Sextus Propertius* in his oeuvre is partly a matter of Pound's having found how to think stanzaically.

## LII

For Eliot, on the other hand, the stanzaic (using the term for both "regular" and "free" verse) was the natural mode of poetic thought.

"Whispers of Immortality," "Sweeney Erect," and "Sweeney among the Nightingales," those quatrain poems from the early 1920s, are splendidly melodramatic with their eye-catching and very different openings—"Webster was much possessed by death," "Paint me a cavernous waste shore," "Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees"—their sharply individuated stanzas, and their unpredictable but successful progressions .

And in "Prufrock," "The Portrait of a Lady," and *The Waste Land* he confidently heightens the dramatic differences in tone between each verse unit, with an over-all patterning that was peculiarly his own, and which carried over into *Four Quartets*, both individually and as a whole, with *their* over-all patterning.

*Burnt Norton* really *is* an opening and *Little Giddings* a concluding, over and above what is talked about in them.

You don't get such effects to the same degree in Laforgue. Nor is there a comparable inevitability in the progression of Valéry's "Le Cimetière

Marin,” in part perhaps because he inserted new stanzas in already self-sufficient (published) texts.

### LIII

Re-establishing poems, whether or not stanzaic, as expressive sequences of discrete units encouraged a more attentive reading. You didn't simply relax into a generalized mood after taking your cue from the first line or two.

It also became easier to acknowledge that some parts could be working better than others without the work's therefore becoming a failure because it wasn't "organic."

When Yeats, stimulated partly by Pound, revised some of his earlier poems, he was improving details, rather than doing a Wordsworthian or Keatsian revisioning.

And implicit in such revisings was the fact that the poet hadn't received the poem through some kind of quasi-divine inspiration—and that it was nevertheless still a poem and not "mere verse."

You could also bring to earlier poetry by other hands a mind that was doing more than deciding what kind of poem you were looking at (Romantic, Classical, Ironical, and so forth) and reacting accordingly because you "knew" what you'd be finding there.

Older poems, too, could be affairs of what I have elsewhere called stretches.

### LIV

The progression from the first to the second stanzas of Wordsworth's "Daffodils," for example, doesn't become any less good because of what goes on in the rest of the poem.

I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er vale and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host of golden daffodils;  
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,  
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine  
And twinkle on the milky way,  
They stretched in never-ending line  
Along the margins of a bay:  
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,  
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The first stanza narrows down from the active “I wandered” and “that floats on high” to the merely participial fluttering and dancing, and the syntactical parallelism of “Beside the lake, beneath the trees,/ Fluttering and dancing,” ending with the light “breeze”

The second reverses the process, the first line exploding with the latinate “Continuous” and syntactically incomplete, so that you drive forward into the second line to see what main verb is coming.

That line too is incomplete, so you come to the third line and a new momentum is begun that requires the fourth line for syntactic completion.

The stanza closes with an almost equal energizing of the perceiving self taking in those ten thousand daffodils at a glance, and the, well, the (alas) slightly literary sprightly dancing of those ten-thousand head-tossing flowers like a lot of country maidens in an operetta.

The weakness of the rest of the poem doesn’t affect these things.

## LV

The Imagist movement, as articulated best by Pound, and still (like the invention of the sonnet earlier) generating decent poems many years later, made it possible to distill out the “good” parts in more discursive poems or drafts of poems without lapsing into mere scene painting.

Like that Zen ink-wash drawing of the five persimmons, Imagism foregrounded the act of perception.

It seized the moment, and potentialities within it, as Moritake did with,

Fallen petals rise  
Back to the branch—I watch:  
Oh ... butterflies.



and T.E. Hulme did with:

Above the quiet dock at midnight,  
Tangled in the tall mast's corded height  
Hangs the moon. What seemed so far away,  
Is but a child's balloon, forgotten after play.

You could feel in "On Westminster Bridge," the thrill of how

Ships, towers, dome, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields and to the sky,  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

You could discern, in a poem of your own making, or of an associate's, the controlling metaphor or analogy or "image" that was doing the real work, and (freed by free verse from the need for padding) make *that* the poem.

Pound, as he himself famously recorded, distilled a whole twenty- or thirty-line poem down to the two-line "In the Metro."

## LVI

And the "moment" did not have to be a mere flicker. Poems by Verlaine like "Dans l'Interminable Ennui," "Un Grand Sommeil Noir," and "La Lune Blanche" give you moments.

La lune blanche  
Luit dans les bois;  
De chaque branche  
Part une voix  
Sous la ramée...

O bien-aimée.

L'étang reflète,  
Profond miroir,  
La silhouette  
Du saule noir  
Où le vent pleure...

Rêvons, c'est l'heure.

Un vaste et tendre

Apaisement  
Sembler descendre  
Du firmament  
Que l'astre irise...

C'est l'heure exquise.

[The white moon shines in the woods; from each bough comes a voice under the branches—O beloved. The pond, like a deep mirror, reflects the outline of the black willow, where the wind weeps—let us dream; it is the hour. A great tender peace seems to descend from the firmament in which the star glimmers—it is the exquisite hour.]

Tr. John Porter Houston and Mona Tobin Houston

Rimbaud's "Au Cabaret-Vert" is a more solid "moment."

## 5. Diversity

### LVII

The changes that I've been describing made good poetry harder to write in some ways, or at least more challenging.

They shone a brighter light on details of language and form, enlarged the repertoire of formal devices, strengthened the connection of poetry with common-language speech in its syntax and not just its diction, and showed how there could be over-all shapings.

And in so doing they increased the possibility of definable errors or failures at this or that point in a poem.

But they also diminished some of the Romantic either/or pretensions and pressures.

They made it easier to read the words of a work sequentially, and with complete concentration at every point, rather than getting the impression at the outset that this (if it was) was a Real Poem, and then relaxing into its general mood.

It became easier, too, to note that some parts were working better than others, without the work's thereby becoming a failure because it wasn't "organic," and therefore not a real poem.

And there was less need, if any, to think about the over-all “mind” of the author.

### LVIII

If you could legitimately read in that fashion, it made all poems, up to a point, synchronous rather than diachronous.

Which is to say, co-existing in a verbal present rather than receding further and further into the mists or Golden Age landscapes of time, with presumptions about conventions and attitudes that *had* to prevail at this or that point on the time-scale.

### LIX

Not having to strive for *length* and a consistent regularity in order to be impressive has obvious advantages.

During the great early years of the Talkies, features could still be short, visually charged, and not compulsively loquacious. Some of them run only an hour or so, but are so packed with meaningful visual and aural information that they feel longer.

The classic horror movie *The Most Dangerous Game* runs only sixty-three minutes, *The Black Cat* sixty-five, *The Island of Lost Souls* seventy-two.

Among the blessing of the free verse movement was freeing poets from having to come up with impressive enough generalizations to fill out the necessary number of lines for a “serious” poem.

And should a poet wish to talk about major themes without aspiring to a single insistent bardic voice of generalizing authority (Miltonic, Wordsworthian), a longish poem in the early decades of the century could consist of multiple units and voicings, each with its own kind of local precision and what I have elsewhere called “language,” whether metred verse in various kinds of stanzas, like Yeats’s “Meditations in Times of Civil War” and “The Tower,” or the more variegated units of *The Waste Land* in the same year—in effect, poetic suites.

## LX

In “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” for example, in which Yeats was trying for different takes and tones on a central theme or preoccupation, you could have the controlled, historically knowledgeable, contemplative magnificence of :

Surely among a rich man’s flowering lawns,  
Amid the rustle of his planted hills,  
Life overflows without ambitious pains ...

and the low-keyed casualness of:

An affable Irregular,  
A heavily-built Falstaffian man,  
Comes cracking jokes of civil war

and the symbolizing anxiety of,

We are closed in, and the key is turned  
On our anxiety; somewhere  
A man is killed, or a house burned,

and the intensified anxiety of

Nothing but grip of claw, and the eye’s complacency,  
The innumerable clanging wings that have put out the moon.

The range of permitted utterances could be further extended, too.

## LXI

In one of Max Beerbohm’s cartoons, a po-faced little girl, the young Mrs. Humphrey Ward, confronts a hugely grinning Matthew Arnold leaning against the mantelpiece in sponge-bag trousers, and asks him, “Why, Uncle Matthew, oh why, will you not be always wholly serious?”

In the idea of the artist-as-sage lay the idea of the artist-as-serious, after the Wordsworthian or Shelleyan fashion. Edward Lear, and Lewis Carroll, and W.S. Gilbert were not *serious* writers. And if a “serious” writer occasionally kicked up his or her heels, as Eliot would do later as Old Possum, the gap remained.

But the multiple languages used by writers like Yeats, and Lawrence, and Pound permitted of varying degrees of earnestness, and the doing of things that do not require you to be at an extended pitch for a long time.

## LXII

The Lawrence of poems like “Bats” wasn’t a pseudo-Lawrence or sub-Lawrence, minding the store while the *real* Lawrence of *Women in Love* was away on vacation:

Bats, and an uneasy creeping in one’s scalp  
As the bats swoop overhead!  
Flying madly.

Pipistrello!  
Black piper on an infinitesimal pipe.  
Little lumps that fly in air and have voices indefinite, wildly  
vindictive;  
Wings like bits of umbrella.

Bats!

Creatures that hang themselves up like an old rag to sleep;  
And disgustingly upside down.  
Hanging upside down like rows of disgusting old rags  
And grinning in their sleep.  
Bats!

In China the bat is a symbol of happiness.

Not for me!

This too was Lawrence, staying in touch with the organic world without needing to rationalize and dominate it.

The Yeats of those shorter, more playful or sardonic poems of the Thirties, such as “A Statesman’s Holiday,” was still Yeats

The grab-bag *Lustra* (1915) was Pound in mid-passage, keeping his hand in with a variety of observations as he thought his way forward from the cultural base of an idealized, quasi-historical Mediterranean.

In contrast to Eliot, Pound wasn't obsessive about the forms of his books.

### LXIII

There were precedents for all this across the Channel.

The author of those over four hundred deftly quatrained or coupleted addresses on the envelopes of letters to friends, or notes accompanying gifts of preserved fruit, or Easter eggs, or writings by himself was—tada!—that notorious prober of the deeps of existence Stéphane Mallarmé.

But it was Verlaine, that presiding spirit of the English Nineties, who had been the great liberator, moving easily among styles and forms, juxtaposing Baudelairean grandeurs, and his own uniquely “Verlainesque” delicacies like “Les sanglots long/Des violons/ D’automne,” and epigrams, and cabaret songs in argot, with phonetic spelling:

Je m’suis marié le cinq ou l’six  
D’Avril ou d’Mai d’l’anné dergnière,  
Je devins veuf le neuf ou l’dix  
D’Juin ou d’Juillet, j’m’en souviens guère...

[I was married on the fifth or sixth of April or May last year, I became a widower on the ninth or tenth of June or July, I hardly remember.]

And what he helped to liberate British poets *from* was the tradition wherein the truly *serious* poet, the *real* poet, the real maker and shaper, was a writer of long narratives about knowledge and discovery (*The Idylls of the King, The Ring and the Book, The Prelude, Paradise Lost,*) in which the author was the one true perceiver, the real seer—or else a writer of sonnets, either philosophical ones or ones about True Love, and in either case deeply *sincere* ones.

### LXIV

Poems could become more intimately personal, too, because more individuated.

Hopkins, even at his most extravagantly emotive in poems like “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” wasn’t Lear on the heath.

He was writing sonnets that largely observed his own principles with respect to sprung rhythm. And by that conscientious making he was demonstrating that his persistence as poet, while functioning as priest and teacher in an all too mundane world, was part of an honourable tradition and not mere self-indulgence.

And we know more about the “classical” J.V. Cunningham, not all of it flattering to his “image,” from his hundred epigrams, written always with precise formal control, and including a voiced dislike of confessional poetry, than we do about some of

Those fools who would solicit terror  
Obsessed with being unobsessed,  
Professionals of experience...

by whom he no doubt intended poets like Dylan Thomas.

We know poems like his “An Interview with Doctor Drink,” a wholly “modern” equivalent of the anguish in poems like Fulke Greville’s Renaissance “Down in the depth of mine iniquity,” or Baudelaire’s “L’Ennemi,” or Hopkins’ “I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.”

I have a fifth of therapy  
In the house, and transference there.  
Doctor, there’s not much wrong with me,  
Only a sick rattlesnake somewhere

In the house, if it be there at all,  
But the lithe mouth is coiled. The shapes  
Of door and window move. I call.  
What is it that pulls down the drapes?

Disheveled and exposed? Your rye  
Twists in my throat: intimacy  
Is like hard liquor. Who but I  
Coil there and squat, and pay your fee?

Drink was at the center of Thomas’s being for years, and he never wrote about it in his poems. There’s authenticity and authenticity.

## 6. Organicism (2)

### LXV

Paradoxically, the experience of the “organic” in poetry may come most for the reader when there are the kinds of formal complexities that I’ve talked about. Which would put it in some good company outside literature.

The performances that display an effortless-seeming grace, whether in ballet, or figure skating, or great jazz improvisations, are in fact the result of a whole slew of difficult formal imperatives absorbed and transcended.

It is the *shapely* that flows.

A good public or classroom lecture is *paced*. It is an affair of units and variations. When someone simply talks continuously for fifty minutes it’s likely to be tiring to listen to, however much the speaker him/herself may be enjoying it and believing that her/his golden words are sinking deep down into the consciousness of his or her auditors.

### LXVI

Cunningham has suggested that it can be helpful to think of a poem as being analogous to the symbolic record of a game of chess—Pawn to King 4, and the like. It can indeed.

Reading such a record, there are lots of things that you *don’t* think about if you’re trying to follow the essential logic of that particular game, including all the places where a player could have made one move but in fact chose another. (Did my own analogy of “forking” slip into my mind from this article? I truly can’t remember.)

But there is chess and chess. When someone praises the brilliance of a game, they’re speaking about one at an advanced level, in which each of the players is thinking several moves ahead, so that the forkings in it are spots where each of the directions in which the player might go would open up a whole structured sequence.

No-one, on the other hand, would want to read records of the games that Carol and I played in the third-class lounge of the *SS Sylvania* (or



was it the *Ivernia*?) on our honeymoon trip to Europe in 1957, games in which each of us was barely seeing one move ahead.

A game was played, checkmate had occurred, there had been a start and a finish. And we'd had fun playing, even though at one point a bemused onlooker finally pointed out that we had the board the wrong way round.

But if organicism, as a biological metaphor, implies development and *meaningful* sequences, then our games were completely *inorganic*, even though our minds were vastly more relaxed than those of players in a championship would be.

## LXVII

Or again, in snooker too you have a prescribed start (the balls at particular locations on the table), with an even more definite terminus than in chess (the last remaining ball, the black, has been sunk).

And it can be thrilling, particularly if you know how difficult it is to have your cue ball (white) end up where you want after sinking a ball, to watch onscreen a master player like Steve Davies or Stephen Hendry make lovely long breaks in which the white ball always comes back to where another red ball can be sunk, as a prelude to sinking another coloured ball (and vice versa).

And occasionally, without the element of luck in making a hole-in-one in golf, a player may run the whole prescribed sequence from start to finish, each time sinking the black, the highest-scored ball, after sinking a red, and ending up with a bare table and a perfect score, than which you cannot go higher.

And what you know was going on, though even experienced commentators can see only a few possible strokes ahead, is that the *player* had been able to sense a configuration, in however ghostly a form, when he opened the game with the required shot that disrupted the triangle of the red balls.

## LXVIII

So here too, even more than in a great game of chess where the patterns of possible development keep shifting as the players take

turns, you have a *development*, with one perfectly done thing leading to the next, in an incredibly complex spatial-temporal sequence.

Which is to say, if you want to use the metaphor, an “organic” development.

But a perfect score isn’t a paradigm from which everything else is a falling-off (the game inorganic when it *doesn’t* occur).

It’s simply the highest, ultimate, most marvelous example of the workings of “vision,” intelligence, total, uncluttered, wholly self-forgetful concentration, and consummate technical skill that you see in great players in a game in which, as in chess, each player has to re- envision the next stretch of play when his opponent has had his turn and left the balls in a new configuration.

And, like chess, snooker doesn’t become an intrinsically different game when “great” players play than when tyros do, so long as they observe the rules. Snooker is snooker. The same rules and same possibilities are there for everyone.

In which connection, see my remarks about Genius in “Lagniappe and Leftovers.”

## 7. Concluding

### LXIX

It is customary these days to speak as if discrimination was bad *per se*, and so it is, if by discrimination we mean judging by irrelevant standards.

But being indiscriminate is also not generally considered a good thing.

You’re unlikely to applaud when you’re told that an army has been killing soldiers and unarmed civilians indiscriminately.

And if perceiving true resemblances is important, it goes along with perceiving and caring about differences. In dog-show trials and ballroom dancing competitions, the judges are noticing (discriminately) fine points of difference that most of us are simply blind to.

## LXX

Robert Frost famously remarked that free verse is like playing tennis with the net down. (Not that it's all that difficult to keep extruding blank verse, as Shelley demonstrated, particularly if you're not fussy about what parts of speech your lines end with.)

But without a net, a "game" on a tennis court would only be possible if both parties, as they do when warming up or tossing a frisbee, were trying to enable the other to *reach* the projectile, not miss it. (It would be too easy to send the ball to where the opponent wasn't.) Which could have its own balletic gracefulness and variety, no doubt, and be more of an equalizer among players of different ages and abilities.

However, it would lack the thrill of the precise placing of balls through windows of opportunity, the overcoming of difficulties created, the clear-cut sequences of returns in a good rally, the complex plannings ahead inside the time-frame set by the score-keeping ("Love fifteen—Love all"), the intricate interconnectings with another's "mind"—mind, not "personality"—and the felt presence of spectators who know the formal rules and can judge when you have made a tactical or strategic error.

## LXXI

Passable free verse is easier and quicker to write, of course, just as good colour photos are easier to take than good black-and-white ones. A particular blessing is that whereas if you can't come up with a final line for a sonnet—can't make the rhyme—you simply don't have a poem at all, the final line of a free-verse poem may not be as good as you might wish, but it's a closure nonetheless and a poem is *there*.

And it's easier to talk in free verse about that fascinating character called "I," the gourmet meals it prepares, the partnership that's gone sour, the childhood visits to loving grandparents, and so on.

But after a while, free-verse poems by a variety of hands can start merging in the mind the way that TV actors do nowadays, with their good-looking and well-tended faces to which nothing very much, outside of breaking into showbiz and having love troubles, appears to have happened. The real-life agonies and ecstasies haven't been recreated in the verse, as distinct from being referred to.

By and large, the most memorable poems, the ones that take up more or less permanent residence in the textbooks, are what can loosely be called formal verse.

Certainly the, to use an old-fashioned term, best-loved poems are.

“They had *faces* then” (Gloria Swanson to William Holden in *Sunset Boulevard*).

## LXXII

In any event, when you think of all the poems that start with a flare and then fizzle out

—and of the kind of “regular” poem in which the writer attempts to convert prose into poetry by rhyming on whatever words happen to come along (“in,” “by” and the like),

—and the syntactical distortions resorted to in order to meet the demands of metre and rhyme.

—and the free verse that lurches from time to time into iambs.

—and the strained metaphors and limp personifications that keep shouting “Poetry! Poetry! We’re a poem!”

—and the two (it’s usually two) contrived final lines in which the poet is labouring to go out with a bang rather than a whimper—

well, a poem in which everything goes on wheels from the first word to the last and everything works can feel like a minor miracle, can’t it, regardless of length?

And you can see why so many more good poems were written in English in the twentieth century than in either of the two preceding ones.

And why, despite the American obsession with the *big* novel, and the confusion of size with scale, the classic modern novels, the kind we immediately think of as epitomizing an experience or attitude, tend to be relatively short: *The Great Gatsby*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, *A Portrait of the Artist*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *A High Wind in Jamaica*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Good Morning*, *Midnight*, *To the Lighthouse*, etc.

And why very long ones like *Ulysses*, and *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* use multiple languages.

1989–2003

# King Arthur and the Inchcape Rock

## I

In the summer of 1939, when I was ten, I won the annual poetry recitation competition at my North London prep school—Oakleigh Park Preparatory School. It was a prep school in the British sense, one of those many small private institutions in which boys were being prepared to go on to public schools, mostly minor ones, when they reached puberty. But it didn't at all resemble the *univers concentrationnaire* recalled by George Orwell in "Such, Such Were the Joys," or the grotty little upper-class sinkhole of Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*.

It was a day school on a side street, some miles from where I lived, in what must have been the dream home of a well-to-do Victorian family—a large yellow-brick house (Italianate?) with grounds roomy enough to accommodate, now, a cindered playground, a tennis court, a couple of loosely mowed grassy areas, and an enclosed garden (*verboden*) with two or three sheds. At some point, whenever it first became a school, a one-story wing containing three classrooms had been added.

The headmaster and his wife—its owners—were intelligent and civilized people, the predominantly young staff of seven or eight teachers were also decent, and though most of the pedagogy was Stone Age by today's standards, we were kept moving along at a reasonable rate, and without physical or moral bullying. Caning, done only by the Head, was rare.

True, the homework was heavy, an experience I would no doubt have been spared had my parents sent me to the progressive school that they had considered earlier. But the games which we played on Wednesday afternoons weren't made a fetish of, the school assembly each morning was not an occasion for sermonizing about the Oakleigh Park Spirit, and neither was the prize-giving at the close of our annual sports day. In general, the rituals were serious without being pompous—the kind that schoolboys liked.

The poetry recitation competition was one such ritual.

## II

This was my second go at it. The whole school, fifty or sixty boys in their light-blue blazers, was assembled in the two linked classrooms where we met each morning for roll-calls, prayers, and announcements. The judges—a couple of masters and the headmaster’s wife—sat facing us at a table on which stood a large chalice-like silver-plated cup with the names of previous winners engraved on it. And the competitors—I forget how many, but there were some big boys among them—took their turns facing them and disgorging the assigned text.

The previous year the text had been something trippingly stanzaic, by Longfellow, about a town by the sea. As someone who at the age of six, with his mother’s assistance, had memorized all seventeen stanzas of Southey’s “The Inchcape Rock” and enjoyed inflicting them on grown-ups, I hadn’t viewed it as much of a challenge. Buoyed up by the knowledge that I was the youngest competitor, I had rattled it off, omitted a couple of stanzas, and received an honourable mention. The second time felt very different.

## III

The assigned text, that summer of 1939, was a thirty-nine-line passage from near the end of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, beginning with the words, “Then rose the King and moved his host by night,” and going on to describe the final battle with the rebel forces of Modred. And memorizing it—my mother’s help confined to hearing me say from time to time what I remembered and correcting my pronunciation of words like “idylls” and “abyss”—had been unusually difficult. When I stood out there in front of everyone and tried to make my way through the poem, I felt like an imposter, someone who shouldn’t really be there at all.

So I was astounded when the headmaster’s wife finally announced that the winner was Fraser, J. And when I went forward to receive the cup from her hands, a cup bigger than any of the sports-day cups, it was with a feeling of strange, bright irrationality. Later a schoolmate suggested that I only won because I was a favourite of the headmaster’s wife. It was news to me that I *was* a favourite—I thought of myself as a

perfectly normal schoolboy—but since I probably appeared “sensitive,” there may have been something to it.

Subsequently the cup became an embarrassment to me. The school closed down at the outbreak of war, and I didn’t know who to return it to when my year was up. But when I cycled home through the late-afternoon suburban sunlight with the grail gleaming in my saddle-bag, it was with a feeling of elation—of having gone alone to a place of difficulty and performed well there—that I had never known before and have never, in so pure a form, known since. I had also acquired a poem that I would never forget, a poem of significant energies.

#### IV

Here it is:

Then rose the King and moved his host by night,  
And ever pushed Sir Modred, league by league,  
Back to the sunset bound of Lyonesse—  
A land of old upheaven from the abyss  
By fire to sink into the abyss again;  
Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,  
And the long mountains ended in a coast  
Of ever-shifting sand, and far away  
The phantom circle of a moaning sea.  
There the pursuer could pursue no more,  
And he that fled no further fly the King;  
And there, that day when the great light of heaven  
Burned at his lowest in the rolling year,  
On the waste sand by the waste sea they closed.  
Nor ever yet had Arthur fought a fight  
Like this last, dim, weird battle of the west.  
A death-white mist slept over sand and sea;  
Whereof the chill, to him who breathed it, drew  
Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold  
With formless fear; and even on Arthur fell  
Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought.  
For friend and foe were shadows in the mist,  
And friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew;  
And some had visions out of golden youth,  
And some beheld the faces of old ghosts



Look in upon the battle; and in the mist  
Was many a noble deed, and many a base,  
And chance and craft and strength in single fight.  
And ever and anon with host to host  
Shocks, and the splintering spear, the hard mail hewn,  
Shield-breakings, and the clash of brands, the crash  
Of battle-axes on shattered helms, and shrieks  
After the Christ, of those who falling down  
Looked up for heaven, and only saw the mist;  
And shouts of heathen and the traitor knights,  
Oaths, insult, filth, and monstrous blasphemies,  
Sweat, writhings, anguish, labouring of the lungs  
In that close mist, and crying for the light,  
Moans of the dying, and voices of the dead.

## V

The poem—it was a complete work for me—did not instill in me any curiosity about Tennyson, or about *Idylls of the King*. Nor did memorizing it make me a more literary little boy. I had already discovered the joys of thriller writers like John Buchan and Edgar Wallace, and had no interest in goody-goods like Sir Walter Scott. Nor was the passage a significant presence for me when in mid-adolescence I browsed in my boarding-school library and became possessed by lines like A.E. Housman's

The chesnut casts his flambeaux, and the flowers  
Stream from the hawthorn on the wind away.  
The doors clap to; the pane is blind with showers.  
Pass me the can, lad; there's an end to May.

Tennyson's muscular blank verse didn't have the creepy instantaneous effectiveness of his own

Sunset and evening star  
And one clear call for me,  
And may there be no moaning at the bar  
When I put out to sea.

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound or foam,

which was in the school hymnal. For awhile, the passage was buried for me.

Nevertheless, to borrow from Conrad's Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*, acquiring it had been "the furthest reach and culmination" of my experience of poetry up to that point. And it took its place, as I now see, alongside certain other poems that had been at work on me. It is that poetic configuration that interests me here, and the part that it played in my literary education.

## VI

One way and another, I must have read a fair amount of poetry as a child.

In my nursery there were various volumes with poetry in them, most of them passed down to me from my father's childhood—a book of nursery rhymes; a copy of *Struwwelpeter*, with its gruesomely illustrated verses warning of the fates awaiting naughty children; a Victorian reader containing "The Inchcape Rock," accompanied by a steel engraving of waves seething over a twisted black shape like diseased liquorice; several bound volumes of *The Children's Encyclopedia*; and no doubt other works that I have forgotten.

There must have been readers, too, in the kindergarten that I attended for three years, run by a sternly imperialist spinster, and at Oakleigh Park, though with one memorable exception (to be mentioned shortly) I cannot visualize any. And I mustn't overlook—since they too were poems—the hymns in whatever hymnals were used at Oakleigh Park, at my unctuous Sunday school, and in the two churches where from time to time I suffered terminal boredom, one in my suburb, the other in the Wiltshire village where my grandparents lived. But what strikes me now is how little poetry from those years entered my mind in a significant way.

## VII

There are fragments from various "improving" nineteenth-century poems, mostly only a line or two: "The boy stood on the burning deck/  
Whence all but he had fled"; "I remember, I remember/  
The house where I was born,/  
The little window where the sun/  
Came peeping in

at morn,” “One more unfortunate,/ Weary of breath,” the opening of “How Horatius Kept the Bridge.” But I have had to dredge them up; they haven’t *been* there for me for many years.

And it took the coincidence of finding the last six stanzas of it alongside “The Inchcape Rock” in Southey’s collected poems to remind me of the existence of “Bishop Hatto and the Rats,” which I know I also read.

You would think that its nightmarish evocation of the rats swarming up into the tower where the wicked bishop was hiding and stripping the flesh from his bones might have left a few verbal traces on a mind like mine. But no, nothing. Nor can I think of more than a couple of Sunday-school hymns, both of them set to unappealing tunes: “There is a green hill far away/ Without a city wall,/ Where our dear Lord was crucified,/ Who died to save us all,” and “Onward Christian soldiers,/ Marching as to war...”

## VIII

What, then, were the poems or passages that stuck, the texts that either I can still recall verbatim or that, when I turn back to the printed page, have a special charge of meaning for me?

Well, I have already mentioned “The Inchcape Rock.” It describes how Sir Ralph the Rover, out of pure malice, cuts loose the bell which the good old Abbot of Aberbrothok (always hard to pronounce) had fixed on a buoy over the fearsome rock, and how, returning subsequently to the Scottish coast in a fog at night, his ship founders upon the rock, bearing Sir Ralph down with it.

Before this there had been nursery rhymes, especially (if I can judge from how they push themselves forward now),

Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross  
To see a fine lady sit on a white horse.  
Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes  
And she shall have music wherever she goes,

and

Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,  
The beggars are coming to town

Some in rags and some in tags  
And some in silken gowns.

There were others, and I have those by heart too: “Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, / Jack jump over the candlestick,” and “Jack Sprat,” and “Hickory dickory dock,” and “Little Miss Muffett,” and “Mary, Mary, quite contrary,” and “Ding dong bell, / Pussy’s in the well.” But the first two were the most resonant for me.

## IX

And after “The Inchcape Rock,” there was the book that we read in my kindergarten, an abridgement of *Hiawatha*, in a soft, dark-green cover, with black art-nouveau curlicues on it.

I cannot now be confident as to what was in that text. I would like to think that I read a passage like:

From the bottom rose the beavers,  
Silently above the surface  
Rose one head and then another,  
Till the pond was full of beavers,  
Full of black and shining faces,

Or the account of Hiawatha’s journeying through the nightmarish landscape, with its rotting water-plants, sinister shadows, and ominous animal and insect sounds, to the land of the wampum-clad magician Pearl Feather. But I can find no trace of them in my memory. However, I do know that I read certain other passages, for when I reread the poem a few years ago they were *there* for me with the shock of recognition, such as the account of how

Slowly upward, wavering, gleaming,  
Like a white moon in the water  
Rose the Ugudwash, the sun-fish,  
Seized the line of Hiawatha,  
Swung with all his weight upon it,  
Made a whirlpool in the water,  
Whirled the birch canoe in circles,  
Round and round in gurgling eddies...

I shall be referring to some of the other passages later.

## X

Lastly, there were the two opening stanzas, all that I carried away from it, of a poem in a reader in my last year at Oakleigh Park, "The Burial of Sir John Moore after Corunna";

Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,  
As his corpse to the rampart we buried.  
Not a soldier discharged a farewell shot  
O'er the grave where our hero was buried.

We buried him darkly at dead of night,  
The sods with out bayonets turning,  
By the flickering moonbeams' [something] light  
And the lanterns dimly burning.

When I quoted the lines to a senior colleague he recognized them instantly, but was quite unable to recall the name of the author. As I have found since (the poem was there all the time in my 1939 edition of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*). It was by Charles Wolfe (1791-1823), and the missing epithet is "struggling."

## XI

These are not, of course, all the texts that I remember from those pre-war years and that played, as I now see, a part in developing my sense of the possibilities of poetry. A handful of others also come to mind, chiefly because of their formal features. If I have remembered the opening stanza of "How Horatius Kept the Bridge," I am sure that it is partly because of the unbalancing, the postponed closure, that comes with the extra line and rhyme word in the second half of the stanza:

Lars Porsena of Clusium  
By the Nine Gods he swore  
That the great house of Tarquin  
Should suffer wrong no more.  
By the Nine Gods he swore it,  
And named a trysting day,  
And bade his messengers ride forth,  
*East and west and south and north,*  
To summon his array.

Without that penultimate line (emphasis mine), the stanza would, as Orwell said of a poem of Housman's, have merely tinkled.

And even the unspeakable Christopher Robin poems of A.A. Milne had interesting metrical effects in them: "James, James, Morrison, Morrison/ Weatherby George du Pree"; or (from a poem that I learned and performed in kindergarten), "Sir Brian had a battle axe with great big knobs on." I also got by heart two or three of Harry Graham's *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes*: that my mother had typed out for her own amusement, among them

Eating more than he was able,  
John fell dead at the breakfast table.  
"Mummy dear," said sister Meg,  
"May I have Johnny's other egg?"

Obviously I enjoyed the pleasures of closure.

## XII

And occasionally there were the puzzlements of obscurity.

I can still visualize the sandpit at a home in the country, run by my philanthropic godmother, where a Cockney girl of my own age, maybe six or seven, baffled me by singing, "I could ride a sarnet/ Upon an ease to Barnet," words whose meaning she refused to explain when I pressed her, but which, as her shrugging off of my questions implied, were evidently unproblematic to others. If "Without a city wall" in that hymn was odd (why should a hill *have* a city wall?), riding a *sarnet* upon an *ease* to *Barnet* (a suburb near my own) took me into my first linguistic vortex.

However, it is the other poems that interest me here. And before I go on to them, I must make a couple of things plain.

## XIII

What I have been talking about was an old-fashioned upbringing in which no-one in the Thirties ever "taught" me poetry.

In my kindergarten, along with such other art-related activities as stenciling watercolour flowers, framing pictures with passepartout

(and beveling the corners), and building coloured relief maps of Africa and Australia (with plaster-of-Paris) that we had painstakingly drawn, *not* traced, we read poems aloud, mostly in unison, and no doubt with the exhortation to speak *clearly*.

I can still recall the sound of childish voices reciting in chorus, on the occasion of King George the Fifth's Silver Jubilee, a poem by Kipling that we had to memorize and of which all that I can recall, after a fashion, is the opening: "Land of our birth, we pledge to thee/ Our somethings and somethings in the years to be."

I suspect that the parts of *Hiawatha* that I remember were also read aloud, and that the absoluteness of certain lacunae comes from the fact that those parts *weren't* read aloud, if in fact they were in the book.

But I am sure there was no discussion of the poem, no provision of background information, no hint (thank God!) that there was anything allegorical about the events described in it. And things went on in much the same way at Oakleigh Park. We didn't "discuss" "The Burial of Sir John Moore after Corunna." Nor did I ever talk with anyone else about the various other poems that I refer to in these pages. They were simply parts of my private mental ecology.

#### XIV

Furthermore, whatever impression I may have given to the contrary, I do not have a flypaper memory. I doubt that I can recall more than a hundred lines from Shakespeare, and most of those are from *Macbeth*, which I "did" a couple of times in high-school for examination purposes. (The parts that I played in two high-school plays have simply vanished into the sand.) So that such poems or passages as lodged themselves in my memory, and still come back easily, appear to me to have done so because there were special resonances in them for me.

#### XV

How, then, do "my" poems hold together in a configuration? What was I getting from them, or responding to in them?

Well, if one sets aside the nursery rhymes for a moment, there is obviously a good deal of death and dying in them. Sir John is a newly-

made corpse, wicked Sir Ralph goes down with his ship, Tennyson's knights perish under one another's blows "on the waste sand, by the waste sea."

And the passages that I remember from *Hiawatha* mostly involve death—the death of the beautiful youth in green and yellow with whom Hiawatha fights for three days; the death of the immense King of the Sturgeons who swallows Hiawatha; the death of the trickster Pau-Puk-Keewa, trapped in the beaver lodge and beaten to death after he has allowed himself to grow to giant size; the death at Hiawatha's hands of the wampum-armoured and seemingly invincible magician after the woodpecker tells Hiawatha to aim his three remaining arrows at the tuft of hair on the top of his head.

However, the poems about Bishop Hatto, and the boy on the burning deck, and the drowned "unfortunate" also involved deaths, and I didn't much care for *them*. So a bit more explaining seems called for. And I see something that fits in with my own subsequent professional interest in chivalric matters.

The characters in "my" poems and passages weren't clerics or "unfortunates," let alone poets talking about "O, how oft I wish the sun/ Had ta'en my life away." Nor were they simply *standing* like that boy on the burning deck, or sitting, like Little Miss Muffett. They were what used to be called men of action, and the nursery rhymes that had stayed in my mind were also about people *doing* things—Jack jumping, mice (honorary people) running, Tommy Thin putting pussy in the well, and so on.

But I didn't, in poetry, thrill *simply* to strong action, not even when those engaging in it were presented as very worthy.

I did where some of my other reading was concerned. Like other Oakleigh Park boys, I addictively bought boys' papers like *Champion* and *Hotspur* (the kind that Orwell *didn't* like) and lost myself in serials about Rockfist Rogan, R.A.F., and Strang the Terrible, in his Tarzanesque leopard skin, battling prehistoric monsters with his huge stone club.

But in poetry I didn't internalize "How Horatius Kept the Bridge" (in memory I think of it as a poem in which Horatius *dies*), nor did I



especially identify with the success-story aspect of Hiawatha's killings.

## XVI

I think, therefore, that something like the following may have been going on.

The nursery rhymes that had especially resonated for me, as I can now see, were those the most charged with a presence and pressure of being—that strange medley of beggars drawing near the town as the dogs bark and the speaker and hearers listen (“Hark, hark...!”); the fine lady a-jingle on her *real* white horse, made all the realer in contrast to the play horse of the child spectator. And there is something of that pressure and presence in the other poems that I have been talking about.

The deaths that I have mentioned are all the culminations of the lives of people who have freely entered into activities where death is possible.

They aren't necessarily admirable people. Obviously Sir Ralph isn't.

But the accounts of their dyings are more charged with life, with heightened states of consciousness (in the case of Sir John Moore the consciousnesses of his mourners) than those of more ostensibly affirmative doings.

Fascinating as was the description of Hiawatha making his birch-bark canoe, with its stars of dyed porcupine quills, it faded beside the account of the yellow-and-green youth's death at Hiawatha's hands and subsequent rebirth as corn. And the wide-screen creationist activities of the mighty Master of Life, Gitche Manito, felt a bit *threatening*:

From the red stone of the quarry  
With his hand he broke a fragment,  
Moulded it into a pipe-head,  
Shaped and fashioned it with figures.

The “death” passages were less dominative, more open, more charged with strangeness.

## XVII

The settings of the actions were important, too.

That final battle of Arthur's takes place in "the sunset bound of Lyonesse," where "the long mountains ended in a coast/ Of ever-shifting sand, and far away,/ The phantom circle of a moaning sea." It does so in mist so dense that "friend slew friend, not knowing whom he slew," and on the day when "the great light of heaven/ Burned at his lowest in the rolling year."

Sir John Moore is buried at dead of night, by the ramparts, in a silence made palpable by the absence of "natural" noises, and with the aid of lights that have to struggle into being.

The forest—a single, powerful, unbounded thing, like *the* desert, and *the* jungle, and *the* sea—is everywhere in *Hiawatha*, with its contrasts of light and dark, as in the lines about the shining Big Sea Water and the wigwam of Nakonis and how

Dark behind it rose the forest,  
Rose the black and glooming pine-trees,  
Rose the firs with cones upon them.  
Bright before it beat the water,  
Beat the clear and sunny water,  
Beat the shining Big Sea Water.

At times, too, there is an intensified darkness, the darkness of the beaver lodge, the dark interior of the giant sturgeon after *Hiawatha* has been swallowed, the darkness and dangerousness of the water up through which rises the sunfish.

## XVIII

And "[The Inchcape Rock](#)"? Oh yes, yes! Yes *indeed!*

In the two opening stanzas of "The Inchcape Rock," the quiet, the calm, the absence of normally present things are palpable.

No stir in the air, no stir in the sea,  
The ship was as still as she could be.  
Her sails from heaven received no motion,  
Her keel was steady in the ocean.

Without either sign or sound of their shock,  
The waves flowed over the Inchcape Rock;  
So little they rose, so little they fell,  
They did not move the Inchcape Bell.

Or rather, it is *motion* that is absent, the motion of wind and sea, and of the clapper of the bell. For in the fourth stanza, the trance-like picture springs into life:

The Sun in heaven was shining gay,  
All things were joyful on that day;  
The sea-birds screamed as they wheeled around,  
And there was joyaunce in their sound.

## XIX

And there are similar, if less dramatic, destabilizings later when Sir Ralph returns from his predatory roving. It isn't simply foggy or simply a nighttime dark. It is a time when there *should* have been light, when there could still be light, when one strains to see, to bring visibility, as it were, into being, to *restore* things to being:

So thick a haze o'erspreads the sky  
They cannot see the sun on high;  
The wind hath blown a gale all day,  
At evening it hath died away.

On the deck the Rover takes his stand,  
So dark it is they see no land.  
Quoth Sir Ralph, "It will be lighter soon,  
For there is the dawn of the rising moon."

But of course the light isn't strong enough, and sound too fails them. The bell isn't there to be heard, the ship simply drifts along, there aren't even any breakers to warn of the rock's nearness, and disaster comes with "a shivering shock."

## XX

The destabilizings and defamiliarizings with respect to the locations of these poems go deeper too.

The locations are in a sense self-contained and self-sufficient.

They are not downtown London (Wordsworth's "On Westminster Bridge"), or guide-book Venice (Byron's "I stood in Venice on the Bridge of Sighs"), or the galloped-through countryside (Browning's "How They Brought the Good News") between Aix and Ghent.

They are defined simply by their properties—a rock off the Scottish coast, a fort or walled town ("Corunna") with soldiers; mysteriously named woods and waters on a remote unnamed continent; Lyonesse,

A land of old upheaven from the abyss,  
By fire to sink into the abyss again,  
Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,  
And the long mountains ended in a coast  
Of ever-shifting sand, and far away,  
The phantom circle of the rolling sea.

There are no single-state *fixed* settings that serve as pictorial backdrops.

## XXI

Things are impermanent and unfixed in other ways, too—not as they "ought" to be.

A hero, *our* hero, has not only died or been killed but must be buried furtively, without even the minimal elegiac sounds of military obsequies (not even a single drum-beat, a single bugle-call). The beautiful yellow and green youth, in a sense, *gives* himself to Hiawatha in death, and welcomes that death, so that, while sad, it ceases to be merely sad:

"Make a bed for me to lie in,  
Where the rain may fall upon me,  
Where the sun may come and warm me...  
Lay me in the earth, and make it  
Soft and loose and light above me."

And of course "The Inchcape Rock" is a whole complex of defeated expectations.

The Abbot's envisaged permanent safety for sailors is destroyed in a moment when Sir Ralph cuts the bell's rope. The other ships that Sir Ralph envisages foundering on the reef seem not to have materialized (at least there is no mention of them), The Scottish coast that is meant to be "there" for his own plunder-laden ship isn't there—has become a mere absence of sounds and a sensed lurking menace.

Nor is Arthur's final fight at all the sort of thing that it should have been:

A death-like mist lay over sand and sea  
Whereof the chill to him who breathed it drew  
Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold  
With formless fear, and even on Arthur fell  
Confusion, for he knew not whom he fought,  
And friend and foe were shadows in the mist,  
And friend slew friend, not knowing whom he slew.

Furthermore, the destabilizings—and re-stabilizings—that I am talking about are inseparable from various formal features of the poems.

## XXII

I shall put *Hiawatha* to one side now.

I suspect that it lay buried in my mind and contributed (along with a large framed colour reproduction in my bedroom, bought for me by my mother, of a painting of three Indians on horseback gazing across a valley at tiny white wagons) to my sense of "America" as a zone of dramatic possibilities, of beautiful *strangeness*. It may even have contributed to my being drawn, as a graduate student, to Minnesota, rather than to Michigan or Wisconsin. One shouldn't underestimate the power of such imprintings.

But the versification of *Hiawatha*, with its insistent, unflagging falling-forward trochaic movement serves only to affirm a steady forward-moving action or series of actions, without significant checks or pauses of surprises; and each brief closure (a death or whatever) is immediately followed by another push forward to the next event, the next *doing*. It is relentlessly progressive, but in a somewhat muted fashion, with no peaks of elation or troughs of despair.

As I have said, I remembered almost literally no lines from it, probably for those reasons.

Whereas I did indeed remember—will probably never forget—the highly structured mini-dramas of “Hark, hark, the dogs do bark” and “Ride a cock horse/ To Banbury Cross,” the former with its closure on those incongruous and unexplained silken gowns, the latter with its rapid progression from the child’s cock-horse to the expansive splendour of “And she shall have music wherever she goes.”

### XXIII

It is that kind of structuring that is at work in the best part of “The Inchcape Rock.”

There are memorable (at least I remembered them) individual lines and couplets in the poem: “The good old Abbot of Aberbrothok / Had placed that bell on the Inchcape Rock” (a stabilizing practical goodness); “Down sank the bell with a gurgling sound” (a painful finality, a lost goodness); “For where we are I cannot tell/ But I wish I could hear the Inchcape Bell” (dramatic irony); “Sir Ralph the Rover tore his hair,/ He cursed himself in his despair” (crime *really* doesn’t pay); and the concluding “A sound as if with the Inchcape Bell/ The Fiends below were ringing his knell” (the wicked are *damned*—and a very good thing too.)

But the best part of the poem is the stretch of three stanzas (5 through 7) leading up to Sir Ralph having himself rowed out to sink the bell.

### XXIV

When I returned to the poem after a fifty-year absence, I felt (like Proust’s Marcel with his little madeleine cake) a special thrill, a sense of surprise and expansion, when I came to the lines

The sun in heaven was shining gay,  
All things were joyful on the day;  
The seabirds screamed as they wheel’d around  
And there was joyaunce in their sound.

And now I know a bit more about how those lines work.

They come out, in their directness, after a somewhat cluttered and abstract stanza:

*When* the Rock was hid by the surges' swell,  
The mariners heard the warning bell;  
And *then* they knew the perilous Rock  
And blest the Abbot of Aberbrothok.

After the “When...then...and” syntax, the semantically overloaded “know” of the slightly elided “knew the perilous rock,” and the compression of a variety of responses and responders into “blest the Abbot,” the sun shines with an absolute thereness, and one accepts the absoluteness of “All things were joyful on that day,” given the immediate concreteness of “The seabirds screamed as they whirled around” and the *attending* of “And there was joyaunce in their *sound*.”

The shift to perception intensifies in the next stanza, as one jumps (via those seabirds) from the wide-angle “The Sun in heaven was shining gay,/ All things were joyful on that day,” to the cinematic long-shot of “The buoy of the Inchcape Rock was *seen*/ A darker *speck* on the ocean green,” followed immediately by a cinematic cut to a figure doing something unrelated to all this (“Sir Ralph the Rover walked *his* deck”), which is followed in its turn by the act of *his* perceiving the bell (“And he fixed his eye on the darker speck”).

But what follows *that* in the next stanza?—for of course a following is called for, an answering of the hovering question “And what *then*? What did he think, or do?” Nothing expected, instead a swerve away from the buoy into an odd, an effervescent good humour, a stirring of energies:

He felt the cheering power of spring  
It made him whistle, it made him sing;  
His heart was mirthful to excess...

And *then* the closure, the springing of the trap: “But the Rover’s mirth was wickedness.” After which the rest of the poem takes its more or less straightforwardly ironical course.

## XXV

I am not making things up here—claiming a precocious critical insight, though I suppose that in some ways I *was* a bit precocious.

I can remember the *frisson*, the sense of something not quite *right*, evoked by the stanza about the general bright joyfulness (perhaps that “screamed” had something to do with it), and the shock, the revelation of alarming possibilities and inversions, of “But the Rover’s mirth was wickedness.” And I now see better what was going on in the poem formally, including the energizing of the repetition in “It made him *whistle*, it made him sing.”

## XXVI

Likewise I can now see why I should have remembered the first two stanzas of “The Burial of Sir John Moore” and forgotten all the rest of the poem, including such eminently forgettable stanzas as:

Lightly they’ll talk of the spirit that’s gone,  
And o’er his cold ashes upbraid him—  
But little he’ll reck, if they let him sleep on  
In the grave where a Briton has laid him.

A factor, an indispensable factor in that first stanza, is the oddness, the destabilizing oddness, of those near-rhymes, “note/ shot” and “hurried/ buried,” which (especially when followed by the smoothly perfect rhymes of the second stanza, make the mind keep *pushing* slightly, as it were, in an effort to restore complete order. *This* time perhaps (as one reads) there will be a more mellifluous sound there to echo that diphthong “note”; but no, once again there is the flat “shot” and the compounding imbalance of “buried.”

Some things are perfectly normal in nursery rhymes, of course. The nursery rhymes that I remember were full of imperfect rhymes and an ordering that didn’t settle down into stasis, but retained something of the flavour of improvisation, as in the rhyming of

Ride a cock horse  
To Banbury *Cross*  
To see a fine lady  
Ride on a white *horse*,



or the sprung rhythms (noted by Gerard Manley Hopkins) of “Ding dong bell/ Pussy’s in the well.” Those were not *serious* poems, though.

## XXVII

But it is in the passage from *Idylls of the King* that the unbalancings and tensions that I have been talking about are the most elaborate and important. And to that passage, so educative about the possibilities of poetic form, I shall now turn.

Here it is again

Then rose the King and moved his host by night,  
And ever pushed Sir Modred, league by league,  
Back to the sunset bound of Lyonesse—  
A land of old upheaven from the abyss  
By fire to sink into the abyss again;  
Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,  
And the long mountains ended in a coast  
Of ever-shifting sand, and far away  
The phantom circle of a moaning sea.  
There the pursuer could pursue no more,  
And he that fled no further fly the King;  
And there, that day when the great light of heaven  
Burned at his lowest in the rolling year,  
On the waste sand by the waste sea they closed.  
Nor ever yet had Arthur fought a fight  
Like this last, dim, weird battle of the west.  
A death-white mist slept over sand and sea;  
Whereof the chill, to him who breathed it, drew  
Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold  
With formless fear; and even on Arthur fell  
Confusion, since he saw not whom he fought.  
For friend and foe were shadows in the mist,  
And friend slew friend not knowing whom he slew;  
And some had visions out of golden youth,  
And some beheld the faces of old ghosts  
Look in upon the battle; and in the mist  
Was many a noble deed, and many a base,  
And chance and craft and strength in single fight.  
And ever and anon with host to host

Shocks, and the splintering spear, the hard mail hewn,  
Shield-breakings, and the clash of brands, the crash  
Of battle-axes on shattered helms, and shrieks  
After the Christ, of those who falling down  
Looked up for heaven, and only saw the mist;  
And shouts of heathen and the traitor knights,  
Oaths, insult, filth, and monstrous blasphemies,  
Sweat, writhings, anguish, labouring of the lungs  
In that close mist, and crying for the light,  
Moans of the dying, and voices of the dead.

### XXVIII

As I have said, I found the passage very hard to memorize.

I can still recall being alone in our dark and narrow drawing-room, with the intimations of dignity of its ponderously ticking grandfather clock, and glassed-in bookcase, and upright piano, and etched portrait of Admiral Monk in half-armor and full-bottomed wig, and being at the same time alone inside the oddly-textured and shifting spaces of the poem, and being quite sure that I was never going to be able to make my way through it—to see and embody the sequence of doings in it.

Partly, of course, the passage is very general.

The “sunset bound of Lyonesse,” with its fragments of forgotten peoples, its long mountains, its “coast/ Of ever-shifting sands,” and the far-off “phantom circle of the moaning sea,” did not, even then, fit with my sense of the southwest coast of England as experienced in a summer holiday in Dorset or via photographs of the Cornish cliffs in *The Children’s Encyclopedia*. “By fire to sink into the abyss again”? When had *that* happened?

And the fighting was very general too, with no names of individual knights—Sir Lancelot, Sir Perceval, etc.—and no descriptions of armor, pennants, and the like. There was nothing about stages in the battle, the lines of horsemen getting ready to charge, the foot-soldiers, and the rest. There were no *colours* in the scene. (By then I had a boy’s repertoire of images of medieval warfare.)

## XXIX

But far more important than all this was how the lines *went*.

The passage was not a picture or pseudo-picture to be scanned or skimmed. Even now I never, as it were, turn to the ending, or to stretches along the way, when I recall it. It was a sequence to be worked through, enacted, appropriated—a sequence that only lived (for my purposes) as held-in-suspension, spoken-aloud words.

And what has struck me recently about how the verse goes is the almost continuous large or small unbalancings, the movements in direction that are not, in terms of what has been given thus far, the *expected* directions.

## XXX

Let me get down to specifics and go quickly through the passage from start to finish.

I shall talk very largely in terms of what I see now. But once again, I shall be trying to transpose and remain faithful to those kinaesthetic feelings that I had as I tried, I forget for how many weeks, to put together from the words of the poem a three-dimensional event or sequence of events that I could confidently narrate.

## XXXI

One reads (or says):

Then *rose* the King and moved his host by night,  
And ever *pushed* Sir Modred, league by league...

But the parallelism (a parallelism in which “pushed” is kinaesthetically strong enough to match “rose” and “moved”) is deceptive.

The action does not stop at the end of the line, nor does “push” have an object comparable to the host that Arthur moved. Instead, Modred (Modred *solus*, as it were) pushes “back to the sunset bound of Lyonesse.” And the parallelism is not completed there.

Instead, as one waits for further news of the two armies (or two adversaries), we get a verbless piece of further information about Lyonesse:

A land of old upheaven from the abyss,  
By fire to sink into the abyss again.

[ A recent thought: Could I have been misreading this part all these years, and the pushing be what Arthur was doing to Modred? If so, I can only plead that the passage invites the misreading, at least by a ten-year-old.]

### XXXII

And now we have, or so one would think, reached a closure and momentary resting point, before getting back to the *real* center of attention, the doings of the two men. “Arthur did this, Modred did that, and (in case you’re interested), Lyonesse was a place with its own drama, rising volcanically from the sea and eventually sinking back into it again.”

And the line-endings *signal* closure—“Lyonesse...abyss” (will there be *more* near-rhymes?), and then the clipped “again” (“agen”). But the “real” business of the passage is still on hold, and this closure is false:

Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,  
And the long mountains ended in a coast

(no, again a pseudo-parallelism)

Of ever-shifting sands, and far away  
The phantom circle of the moaning sea.

Is there more to come, now that we have embarked on information-giving about that region?

No, now at last, after a nine-line stretch that feels like *more* than nine lines, we get the sudden terse return to the main business:

There the pursuer could pursue no more  
And he that fled no further fly the King.

### XXXIII

But even here the symmetry is less than perfect—is in fact just a little odd, in that one has to think for a moment about who is doing what: “There the pursuer could pursue no more,” and the *pursued* could not (or did) do something?

No, not “the pursued” (or something similar) but “*he* that fled (unnamed) could “no further *fly* the King”; with a sort of backward motion or reversal whereby the grammatically objectless pursuing (by an unnamed pursuer) modulates into the more dramatic flying of a *he* who (as if now blocking his way) cannot fly the King.

### XXXIV

So one stretch of the poem has now come to completion.

Now for what we have been waiting for, the *real* action, the battle.

And there that day, when the great light of Heaven

(the feminine ending assisting the obviously incomplete syntax after the finality of “King”)

Burned at his lowest in the rolling year,  
On the waste sand by the waste sea they closed.

Good, very definite, and the repeated “waste” helps to stabilize things, albeit with a slight semantic flutter [“waste” meaning more than just “empty”? If so, what is missing that *should* be there, or present that shouldn’t?]

So, then, what was the battle *like*? What happened next?

But no, we are given a negating of sorts, or at least a momentary further withholding, even in two lines that form a self-sufficient unit:

Nor ever yet had Arthur fought a fight

(what, that he didn’t win?)

Like this last, dim, weird battle of the West

(the strangeness emphasized by the slow five-step ascent of *like this last dim weird battle*”)

Then a line of straightforward amplification—"A death-like mist lay over land and sea"—with an air of completeness, but followed by a series of suspensions or near-suspensions, including that effect (of which W.B. Yeats was a master) whereby a statement appears to have been completed at the end of a line ("till all his blood was cold") only to be continued in the following line.

The words at the ends of the lines, too, are mostly *active* ones—verbs, verbs in that position almost for the first time:

Whereof the chill, to him who breathed it, *drew*  
Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold  
With formless fear; and even on Arthur *fell*  
Confusion, since he saw not whom he *fought*.  
For friend and foe were shadows in the mist,  
And friend slew friend not knowing whom he *slew*...

Again a closure in that last line.

### XXXV

And now we move forward into actions that are, as it were, self-sustaining, rather than being presented as parts of a subordinate clause or clauses. Except that now the emphasis is on perception—how things appear—rather than on actions:

And some had visions out of golden youth,  
And some beheld the faces of old ghosts  
Look in upon the battle; and in the mist  
Was many a noble deed, and many a base...

And as the passage continues, after the slightest of pauses, we do not have people *doing* things, but simply things happening, in a de-individuated way

And chance and craft and strength in single fight.  
And ever and anon with host to host  
Shocks, and the splintering spear, the hard mail hewn,  
Shield-breakings, and the clash of brands, the crash  
Of battle-axes on shattered helms, and shrieks  
After the Christ, of those who falling down  
Looked up for heaven, and only saw the mist...

It was odd to be speaking so long a sentence with no main verb. And there was one more oddness to come.

### XXXVI

It always seemed to me, having finally arrived at that “mist,” as if I had reached the end of the passage.

In fact, though, it continued for four-and-a-half-lines more, but in such a way as not, somehow, to be *clearly* adding something new, or at least something obviously richer and stronger than what had come before.

And the feeling of something dangling was increased by there *still* being no main verb.

And *shouts* of heathen and the traitor knights,  
Oaths, insult, filth, and monstrous blasphemies,  
Sweat, writhings, anguish, *labouring* of the lungs  
In that close mist, and *crying* for the light,  
Moans of the dying, and voices of the dead.

*Things* had now taken over altogether.

### XXXVII

The description continues, I believe, but, despite having had to teach the *Idylls* in second-year English one year, I have no idea what comes afterwards, any more than I do with respect to what precedes the whole passage. “My” battle ends there.

The passage is a complete poem—a poem that had given me a “serious” acquaintance along the way with reversed feet (“*Back* to the sunset bound”), additional syllables and near-elision (“from the abyss”), syntactical inversion (“a land of old upheaven”), familiar words with unfamiliar meanings (“sunset *bound*”, “clash of *brands*), two kinds of enjambment, transitive verbs used intransitively (the chill of the mist *drew* down with the blood of him who breathed it), archaic syntax (“shrieks *after* the Christ”), and *long* sentences and *lots* of parallelism and near-parallelism.

### XXXVIII

So there it is, then, something embedded in my mind for half a century, like the Inchcape Rock.

It is a gift from Oakleigh Park Preparatory School—from whomever it was who picked that passage for us in the summer of 1939. And where the humanities were concerned, it was the most precious gift that I received there.

As I said, Oakleigh Park was a good school, and we appropriately wore the figure of Pegasus, the winged horse, on the pockets of our light-blue blazers. I have never regretted not going to the “progressive” school that my parents had considered. One did in a sense feel at Oakleigh Park that one was moving onward and upward (“Per ardua ad astra”), and had the war never come, I would no doubt have gone on to a much more congenial secondary school than the all-too-Orwellian boarding-school that I ended up in.

But I remember very little of the formal teaching at Oakleigh Park, and what I do remember—the shape and feel of Latin tables and of math assignments that made me teary-eyed with anxiety at home—is largely unpleasant. History, Latin, French, Math—virtually total blanks. I cannot remember anything that I was *told* about any of those subjects by any of the masters.

No, the verbal things that I do remember, with greater or less vividness, are almost all extracurricular.

### XXXIX

I can remember an older master reading to us on two or three occasions, as a reward, from Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch’s marvelously titled romance *Poison Island* (though nothing seemed to *happen* in it). I can remember the opening sentence of a dictation by a grimly humorous younger master from something called *A Hangman’s Diary*: “The beheading sword was a heavy two-handed weapon, the proper use of which required great skill and strength.”

From time to time, too, an even younger one would tantalize those of us sitting near him at lunch by giving us glimpses—some of them, I have since realized, pure fabrications—of horror movies like *Son of*



*Frankenstein* and *The Black Cat* that were playing at local theatres and from which, as with flaming swords, we were shut out by the censor's classification of "H" (for Horror? Horrific?) "Oh please, sir, do go on sir, *how* did he skin him, sir?"

In a sense, as I now see, it was with the unofficial culture that the poems and passages that I have recalled with particular pleasure belonged. They were all, the Tennyson passage included, melodramatic texts, with zones of mystery and danger in them.

But they were not *merely* melodramatic, and I think that in them I was able to enter in a *literary* way into what, for a child, were complex modes of being and feeling with respect to "action."

## XL

Strange things happened in the nursery rhymes without any simple black/white, good/bad pigeonholing.

The killers of Cock Robin display no reluctance about admitting to that deed. Little Tommy Thin may have put pussy in the well, but we're not *told* that he was bad and that Little Johnny Stout was good, nor are their names morally antithetical. Are the three blind mice pitiable or impudent, the knife-wielding farmer's wife scared or cruel? Are the beggars pitiable or sinister or both? *Why* should the candle to light us to bed be followed immediately by the decapitating chopper?

It isn't a dichotomized world. And in the serious poems, likewise, there isn't a simple dichotomizing in which Good confronts Evil and triumphs over it. Sir Ralph defeats *himself*; we do not know how Sir John died or see the enemy forces; and at times there is no obvious moral reason why Hiawatha should be the slayer rather than the slain. This is not a world of permanent and correct wins and stabilizings. It is a world, in fact, in which losing is more common than winning.

But if there are defeats in the poems, the poems themselves are not defeatist, unlike some of those whose *Weltschmerz* ("The chestnut casts his flambeaux, and the flowers/Stream from the hawthorn on the wind away") thrilled me in my unhappy adolescence.

Because of the formal and rhetorical features that I have spoken of, there is a creative ordering in them, an ordering process, into which the

reader is drawn, even when what is described is disorderly or the vitiation of order. There are energies there, energies of the perceiving mind, that persist whether what is being described is a win or a loss.

## XLI

And there is one last verbal inheritance from Oakleigh Park that I must mention.

It is the opening verse of the [magnificent hymn](#) that we sang *slowly* (it does just trip along on the printed page) at the end of the breaking-up ceremony each term, in the same large double classroom where I competed for the cup:

O God, our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come;  
Our shelter from the stormy blast,  
And our eternal home.

That hymn, I now realize, must have had a peculiar resonance that summer for the small staff, at least six of whom, including the headmaster, were young enough to be eligible for military service.

And the choice of the Tennyson passage, as I also now realize, may not have been altogether fortuitous.

There is nothing in it of the assurance—the assurance of asking—of “O God, our help in ages past.” Essentially, it is a symbolist poem, or at least a poem whose nominal clarity of expository outline (“There was this battle, and I’ll tell you about it”) is constantly disrupted.

But for all the confusion described in it, all the absence of conventional rewards, the battle was one that *had* to be fought, and Arthur had to go on striving to perceive things correctly in that fearsome mist and keep up his courage.

One way and another, I would say that the very different resonances of the two poems, epitomes of a good deal of other poetry, have gone on working in my mind ever since. If, as may well have been the case, it was the headmaster’s wife, Mrs. Long-Brown, who chose the passage for the competition, I owe her a good deal more than a cup.

## **Texts referred to:**

### **The Inchcape Rock**

No stir in the air, no stir in the sea,  
The ship was still as she could be,  
Her sails from heaven received no motion.  
Her keel was steady in the ocean.

Without either sign or sound of their shock  
The waves flowed over the Inchcape Rock;  
So little they rose, so little they fell,  
They did not move the Inchcape Bell.

The good old Abbot of Aberbrothok  
Had placed that bell on the Inchcape Rock;  
On a buoy in the storm it floated and swung,  
And over the waves its warning rung.

When the Rock was hid by the surge's swell,  
The mariners heard the warning bell;  
And then they knew the perilous Rock,  
And blest the Abbot of Aberbrothok.

The Sun in Heaven was shining gay,  
All things were joyful on that day;  
The sea-birds screamed as they wheeled around  
And there was joyaunce in their sound.

The buoy of the Inchcape Bell was seen  
A darker speck on the ocean green;  
Sir Ralph the Rover walked his deck,  
And he fixed his eye on the darker speck.

He felt the cheering power of spring,  
It made him whistle, it made him sing;  
His heart was mirthful to excess,  
But the Rover's mirth was wickedness.

His eye was on the Inchcape float;  
Quoth he, "My men, put out the boat,  
And row me to the Inchcape Rock,  
And I'll plague the Abbot of Aberbrothok."

The boat was lowered, the boatmen row,  
And to the Inchcape Rock they go;  
Sir Ralph bent over from the boat,  
And he cut the Bell from the Inchcape float.

Down sank the Bell with a gurgling sound,  
The bubbles rose and burst around;  
Quoth Sir Ralph, "The next who comes to the Rock  
Won't bless the Abbot of Aberbrothok.

Sir Ralph the Rover sailed away.  
He scoured the seas for many a day;  
And now grown rich with plundered store,  
He steers his course for Scotland's shore.

So thick a haze o'erspreads the sky  
They cannot see the Sun on high;  
The wind hath blown a gale all day,  
At evening it hath died away.

On the deck the Rover takes his stand,  
So dark it is they see no land.  
Quoth Sir Ralph, "It will be lighter soon,  
For there is the dawn of the rising Moon."

"Canst hear," said one, "the breakers roar?  
For methinks we should be near the shore."  
"Now where we are I cannot tell,  
But I wish I could hear the Inchcape Bell."

They hear no sound, the swell is strong;  
Though the wind hath fallen they drift along.  
Till the vessel strikes with a shivering shock,—  
"Oh Christ! It is the Inchcape Rock!"

Sir Ralph the Rover tore his hair;  
He curst himself in his despair;  
The waves rush in on every side,  
The ship is sinking beneath the tide.

But even in his dying fear  
One dreadful sound could the Rover hear,  
A sound as if with the Inchcape Bell,

The Devil below was ringing his knell.\*

Robert Southey

**Bishop Hatto and the Rats** (conclusion)

He listened and looked; ... it was only the Cat;  
But the Bishop he grew more fearful for that,  
For she sat screaming, mad with fear  
At the Army of Rats that were drawing near.

For they have swum over the river so deep,  
And they have climbed the shores so steep,  
And up the Tower their way is bent,  
To do the work for which they were sent.

They are not to be told by the dozen or score,  
By thousands they come, and by myriads and more,  
Such numbers had never been heard of before,  
Such a judgment had never been witnessed of yore.

Down on his knees the Bishop fell,  
And faster and faster his beads did he tell,  
As louder and louder drawing near  
The gnawing of their teeth he could hear.

And in at the windows and in at the door,  
And through the walls helter-skelter they pour,  
And down from the ceiling and up through the floor,  
From the right and the left, from behind and before,  
From within and without, from above and below,  
And all at once to the Bishop they go.

They have whetted their teeth against the stones,  
And now they pick the Bishop's bones;  
They gnawed the flesh from every limb,  
For they were sent to do judgment on him!

Robert Southey

**Nursery rhymes**

Hark, hark,  
The dogs do bark,

The beggars are coming to town,  
Some in rags  
And some in tags,  
And some in silken gowns.

Ride a cock-horse  
To Banbury Cross  
To see a fine lady  
Sit on a white horse.  
Rings on her fingers  
And bells on her toes,  
And she shall have music  
Wherever she goes.

Three blind mice,  
See how they run.  
They all ran after the farmer' wfe,  
Who cut off their tails with a carving knife,  
Did you ever see such a thing in your life  
As three blind mice?

Ding dong bell,  
Pussy's in the well.  
Who put him in?  
Little Johnny Thin.  
Who pulled him out?  
Little Johnny Stout.

Originally, and up into the 20th century by some speakers, "Cross" would have been pronounced the same as "horse." I've spoken here of how it was pronounced in my family.

### ***Hiawatha* passage**

Dark behind it rose the forest,  
Rose the black and glooming pine-trees,  
Rose the first with cones upon them;  
Bright before it beat the water,  
Beat the clear and sunny water,  
Beat the shining Big-Sea-Water.  
Slowly upward, wavering, gleaming,  
Like a white moon in the water

Rose the Ugudwurk, the sun-fish,  
Seized the line of Hiawatha,  
Swung with all his weight upon it,  
Made a whirlpool in the water,  
Whirled the birch canoe in circles,  
Round and round in gurgling circles . . . .

From "The Song of Hiawatha"  
H.W. Longfellow

### **O God! Our Help in Ages Past**

O God! Our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come,  
Our shelter from the stormy blast,  
And our eternal home:

Beneath the shadow of thy throne,  
Still may we dwell secure;  
Sufficient is thine arm alone,  
And our defence is sure.

Before the hills in order stood,  
Or earth received her frame,  
From everlasting thou art God,  
To endless years the same.

A thousand ages, in thy sight,  
Are like an evening gone;  
Short as the watch that ends the night,  
Before the rising sun.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,  
Bears all its sons away;  
They fly forgotten, as a dream  
Dies at the opening day.

O God! Our help in ages past,  
Our hope for years to come;  
Be thou our guard while life shall last,  
And our eternal home.

Isaac Watts

# Personals

## I

Poems can take up residence, can't they? Some march in and plump themselves down and never budge. Others arrive with a party and you don't particularly notice them at the time, but they hang around afterwards. Or they sidle in, and later you come upon them lurking diffidently in a basement or attic and they are, well, kind of cute, and you say O.K. and become used to their presence.

Figures of speech, figures of speech. But words like "admire," "love," "respect," "like," "enjoy," "value," "cherish" are loose, and are particularly misleading where poems are concerned if they imply sharply different kinds of relationships.

"Favourite," too, can be a bit tricky if it suggests an exclusionary valuing, an implication that these particular poems are better than all the umpteen others that they aren't.

And it's not as if they're all there for you all the time, like nobles at the Sun King's Versailles. Months or more can go by without your thinking of some of them at all.

## II

But in one way or another, they are there—there for you to be with at different times, in different situations, different moods. Zones of being, patterns of experience, ways of coping, definings of parts of your "self." And existing in time, not space—as voicings, not shapes on the page to be skimmed or scanned with the eye.

Perhaps you have them by heart and voice them silently or aloud from time to time, start to finish. Or sense what lies ahead when the opening lines come to mind, like an agreeable street whose details you don't all remember, and which you don't need to go along at that point. Or you find phrases from them flickering into your consciousness from time to time in particular situations.

And when you're speaking them, or being spoken, other poems from the same hands are irrelevant. You're not enacting bits and pieces of



others' biographies or autobiographies and pretending temporarily to *be* Yeats or Donne or Rimbaud.

Some of them may be ones that you'd particularly like to have written yourself. Together, perhaps, they constitute almost a new Borgesian hyper-poet, a creating and experiencing self that you would like to have been.

Other poems may be as good or better. But these, in their various ways, are "yours."

### III

Here, then, are a few of mine that have taken up residence over the years. They fit, so far as I can see, with the line of argument in "Powers of Style." Partly they illustrate it.

Are they "classical"? "romantic"? How clumsy that dichotomy can be. Spectrums are preferable.

They Are.

They're also *made*—shaped, formed, crafted, coherent. And very largely self-explanatory. They could all be anonymous and no less meaningful.

### IV

The Comments, not written in the order in which they appear here, took me by surprise.

This was at the outset of the present century.

I'd intended just to reproduce a number of poems on my website, with a few explanatory notes, as a Poundian defining by example of my actual tastes in poetry at that time.

But then the words started coming, and I let them come. I was discovering things about poetry, and about my own dealings with it, and about some of the theoretical issues concerning it, that I hadn't noticed before, or had forgotten, and that seemed of more than merely personal application.

Here are some of the results.

[Anonymous, "Grief of a Girl's Heart"](#)

[Alexander Boyd, "Fra Bank to Bank"](#)

[John Donne, "The Sun Rising"](#)

[Théophile Gautier, "On the Lagoons"](#)

[Thomas Hardy, "The Haunter"](#)

[Andrew Marvell, "The Mower to the Glow-Worms"](#)

[Thomas Nashe, "In Time of Pestilence"](#)

[Arthur Rimbaud, "At the Green Tavern"](#)

[Gabriel Rossetti, "The Woodspurge"](#)

[François Villon, "Ballade of the Hanged"](#)

[Thomas Wyatt, "They Flee from Me"](#)

[W.B. Yeats, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death"](#)

## Grief of a Girl's Heart

O Donal Oge, if you go across the sea,  
Bring myself with you and do not forget it;  
And you will have a sweetheart for fair days and market days,  
And the daughter of the King of Greece beside you at night.

It was late last night the dog was speaking of you;  
The snipe was speaking of you in her deep marsh.  
It is you are the lonely bird through the woods;  
And that you may be without a mate until you find me.

You promised me, and you said a lie to me,  
That you would be before me where the sheep are flocked;  
I gave a whistle and three hundred cries to you,  
And I found nothing there but a bleating lamb.

You promised me a thing that was hard for you,  
A ship of gold under a silver mast;  
Twelve towns with a market in all of them  
And a fine white court by the side of the sea.

You promised me a thing that is not possible  
That you would give me gloves of the skin of a fish;  
That you would give me shoes of the skin of a bird;  
And a suit of the dearest silk in Ireland.

O Donal Oge, it is I would be better to you  
Than a high, proud, spendthrift lady:  
I would milk the cow; I would bring help to you;  
And if you were hard pressed, I would strike a blow for you.

You have taken the east from me; you have taken the west from  
me,  
You have taken what is before me and what is behind me;  
You have taken the moon, you have taken the sun from me,  
And my fear is great that you have taken God from me!

Anonymous

Tr. from the Irish by Augusta Gregory.

## I

A familiar scenario—a rural seduction and abandonment by a *Luftmensch* who may even (after all, this is *Ireland*) largely believe his own rhetoric. What differentiates it is the stage in this particular story, and the character of the girl.

We feel her poignantly still hoping, for he may not yet have gone, and she understands him, understands his weakness, and his boasting, and his lying, and still loves him, and would be as good for him, in practical terms, as she says.

So there's the terrible force of her yearning—a strong and decent person trying by sheer force of will and sense of the truth of the situation to make the abandonment not happen.

She can judge him, clear-eyed—"You promised me, —*and you said a lie to me.*" She knows that the things he promised are *not* possible (though we're still in a literal reality with that "suit of the dearest silk in Ireland" and those marketplaces). But she would be, if he could only see it, what his romantic yearnings sketch for him, or at least what would actually be available to him.

It's not as if she were the voice of dull bog-trotting "practicality," pooh-poohing romance. She too can speak poetically. She can envisage being splendid in bed. She can see the pathos of his lonely questing. She would be his sweetheart, not just a permanently pregnant wife. (Mercifully she doesn't seem to be pregnant at the moment, so that's not the issue.)

But he *wasn't* out there in the field that night, and we can feel the cruel auto-intoxication of his lyricism, feeding on itself, one romantic promise topped by another. So that most probably he *is* lost to her. And there is a painful virtual acknowledgment of that in the last two stanzas, in the conditional voice, "I would...I would..." (in contrast to the "I *will*" of the first stanza), and the moving, because believable, vigour of, "And if you were hard pressed, I would strike a blow for you," and then the horror of absolute loss and despair, expressed with its own deeper and more resonant poeticality in the final stanza.

O Donal Oge, what a fool you are, what a *romantic* fool. And yet maybe he *has* to go and try. And will she still be there for him (Peer Gynt's Solveg) should he eventually return?

Think of the work that would have to go into a short story to achieve this complexity—and probably even then missing the emotional essences. A poem permits *not* having to say a lot of things.

## II

I found “Grief of a Girl’s Heart” in David Bergman and Daniel Mark Epstein’s excellent *Heath Guide to Poetry* where it’s described as having been translated from the Gaelic by Augusta Gregory, W.B. Yeats’ patron.

If you look up her translation through Google, you will find that it’s presented as a *prose* translation. The stanzas are printed as paragraphs, and there are eight extra paragraphs between “our” final stanza and the one preceding it, all of them weak and inessential. It’s as if two different poems had got jumbled up together. For example, “It is early in the morning that I saw him coming, going along the road on the back of a horse; he did not come to me; he made nothing of me; and it is on my way home that I cried my fill.”

I have no idea what the Gaelic original was like, or whether Bergman and Epstein adapted it themselves or found it adapted somewhere else.

So, should we feel obliged to ask which is the *real* poem or text? Or whether the text that I’ve given here possesses that supposed Coleridgean essence of poetry, “organic unity”?

## III

If I hadn’t mentioned the prose version, no one would be worrying about whether or not this was a poem, would they? Obviously it is, at least if we mean that it consists of definite stanzas, that there is a clear relationship between syntax and lineation, and that there is a discernible rhythm to the lines, even if it would be hard to describe formally.

Furthermore (if that’s too minimal a definition), there’s a satisfying progression from what happens in one stanza to what happens in the next, and every sentence adds something of consequence to what’s gone before, and there aren’t unnecessary words or ill-chosen ones, and the drama is poignant, and we’re experiencing the strong and deep feelings of a real-feeling young countrywoman.

So I myself would say that certainly it has unity. It's about a single emotion-charged situation, and it has the kind of flow that we could discern in some graceful or dramatic stretch of physical action (such as a skating routine), or in a song that we like, or in a stretch of moving spontaneous speech, and with what feel like a natural beginning and ending, so that we don't want more from before it begins or after it ends.

#### IV

But if the question were about the poem's "origins," in an attempt to ascertain whether it evolved naturally inside a poet's mind (a poet, not a mere "writer," or "author") in the way that a plant develops from a seed, well, my own feeling would be, Who knows? Who cares?

Obviously what we have here is a palimpsest, the result of some oral text or texts (probably the latter) in Gaelic being transcribed, and then translated, and maybe altered by the translator before it was printed (maybe in consultation with a friend or two?), and then altered substantially later on by at least one set of editorial hands. Bergman and Epstein are themselves published poets.

And if someone were to feel uneasy about not being able to feel in the presence of the "mind" of an author voicing his or her own poem as it evolves, well, that would be understandable, given the number of poems that do give us that sensation, including some in my own selection here. But lots of feelings are understandable and wrong, and in fact most wrong feelings are more understandable than right ones, being simpler and cruder.

Personally I like the old gentleman who, when asked by the child why noodles are called noodles, replied gravely, "Well, my dear, they look like noodles, and they smell like noodles, and they taste like noodles, so we call them *noodles*."

If it looks like a poem and feels like a poem and moves you like a poem (which is to say like a lot of other works that you have no trouble seeing as poems), then it *is* a poem.

## V

In one of his later books, F.R. Leavis indignantly dismissed the suggestion that a computer could write a poem, with its implication of the obsolescence of Man and all that rubbish. But of *course* it can, at least if you consider the result a poem when you don't know its provenance.

Obviously the computer couldn't do so without a lot of "poem" rules having been fed it or absorbed by it when told what to look for. It wouldn't just sit there humming gently after doing rocket science and then burst into song. But that would be irrelevant to the quality of the resulting text.

In all likelihood, it would be a *bad* poem, or a *banal* poem, or, well, simply not a particularly *interesting* one. But if it were good, so much the better. We can always use more good poems.

To call something a poem, even though we indeed use the word honorifically—about some graceful physical action, say—doesn't, or at least shouldn't, carry with it any implication of innate merit, any more than does calling something a novel or a play.

People don't go around saying admiringly, "You're a real *playwright*, Joe."

## VI

In saying all of which, I am not, as Leavis (following Lawrence and himself deeply and intelligently Romantic) might have said, seeking to "do dirt" on life.

On the contrary, what I've said makes it easier to hang onto the goodness and greatness of great and good poems, unperturbed by any Lowest Common Denominator challenge.

By which I mean, the ploy by which someone who thinks he or she has isolated the minimum features which a group of works have in common, proceeds to treat the higher, richer, subtler forms as if they were *really* only what you have in the lower ones.

It also makes it easier to experience the poem in front of you as you experience other stretches of memorable speech, which is to say,

without immediately wanting to make your way into increasingly amorphous experiences prior to its presence, as if *they* were the real reality.

## VII

And it's not as though we were getting rid of "mind" or "quality."

Creative acts of mind did indeed lead to "Grief of a Girl's Heart" as we have it here.

Some Irish person or persons, somewhere, sometime, felt the pathos in a certain kind of situation and evoked verbally the thought processes of a certain kind of young woman.

Augusta Gregory, herself a playwright, read or heard the result, and translated and published it, maybe with improvements of her own.

Subsequent readers felt the quality of the *good* parts, and turned the prose into verse (or had it been verse before she translated it?), and left out the weaker parts. And I too felt the quality of the result, and the poem has stayed in my *own* mind.

But what *is* quality? (asked jesting Pilate, and did not wait for an answer). Well, it's what we all have no trouble recognizing the existence of when we buy one stereo system or pair of jogging shoes in preference to others, and the kind of defining involved can occur in all manner of situations and has nothing to do intrinsically with snobbishness or class.

There are all manner of good qualities in all manner of things, including poems. What we have here in "my" poems are simply some of them, and there are lots of others in a lot of other poems that I admire (see *A New Book of Verse* ) and some of which are greater than all but a few of the ones here.

In the rest of these notes, I have largely been trying to clarify to myself what kinds of things it is that I myself have been responding to with lasting pleasure in these particular poems.



## Fra Bank to Bank

Fra bank to bank, fra wood to wood I rin,  
Ourhailit with my feeble fantasie;  
Like til a leaf that fallis from a tree,  
Or til a reed ourblawin with the win.

Twa gods guides me: the any of tham is blin,  
Yes and a bairn brocht up in vanitie;  
The next a wife ingenrit of the sea,  
And lighter nor a dauphon with her fin.

Unhappy is the man for evermair  
That tills the sand and sawis in the air;  
But twice unhappier is he, I lairn,  
That feidis in his hairt a mad desire,  
And follows on a woman throw the fire,  
Led by a blind and teachit by a bairn.

Mark Alexander Boyd (1563-1601)

### I

In *ABC of Reading* (1934) Ezra Pound said of this poem, "I suppose it is the most beautiful sonnet in the language, at any rate it has one nomination." Arthur Quiller-Couch, who had aspired, as he said, to "range over the whole field of English verse...and to choose the best," had included it in 1900 in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, but along with over eight hundred other poems. So it was Pound who retrieved it.

A brief glossing:

ourhailit/ overcome/ overwhelmed  
ourblawin/ blown over  
til/ to  
blin/ blind  
ingenrit/ engendered/born  
dauphin/ dolphin  
sawis/ sows  
throw/ through

And a confession. It was only after this whole commentary was almost done that I went to the notes in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* and learned that “lichter nor a dauphin” meant “more wanton than a dolphin” and not, as I had assumed, simply “lighter” (more freely moving, more sportive).

## II

Which gives more force to Yvor Winters’ comment (unamplified) that “the characterizing [two-line] description of Venus... is one of the greatest moments in our poetry,” and to his judgment that this is “one of the most extraordinary poems in our language.”

The poem is so *animate*, isn’t it? The dramatic scene-setting in the first line keeps up. We *feel* that figure, driven half crazy, out there running erratically, and no doubt falling or crouching from time, in the woods, like a dog on a scent—but the scent of what? Out there seeking, or out there trying to *escape* from inner turmoil?

And then we have the powerful firming up of the erotic, like in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* perhaps, in which those physical gods (unnamed) are more than just metaphors, but are physically *there*, in the domesticating language of “bairn” and “wife,” the child accessible to moral condemnation like an ordinary spoiled kid, and then the erotic evocation of roundness and smoothness and shining slipperiness of the body rejoicing in the amoral freedom of its own medium.

“Fra bank to bank” and Rossetti’s “The Woodspuge” make an interesting pair.

## III

Some thoughts about language.

From the age of ten until sixteen I was “taught” Latin. I know no Latin. I never have. I cannot read the shortest Latin epigram by Martial or Catullus. The only benefit of that pedagogical experience was to make me sympathize later with students to whom poems that are “obvious” to so-called literates may be almost as obscure as Latin.

In high-school we did our homework on Chaucer’s *Prologue* the way we did it with Latin, looking up the meanings of words and trying to

remember them. I'm sure we weren't allowed to write them down in the textbook. It would have been bad for our "character," and probably the textbooks had to be handed in at the end of the term.

At Oxford, where we did Anglo-Saxon and Middle-English texts in the same glossary fashion, we were at least able to write the equivalents down. I vandalized my first edition of Sweet's horrible *Anglo-Saxon Reader* in that way.

No-one ever helped us to read the texts aloud with a more or less correct pronunciation. In consequence, we entirely failed to acquire the awareness that writers in those tongues weren't *trying* to be obscure or, necessarily, saying profound things beyond our comprehension. (It takes an effort, I find, when passing young people in the street speaking Chinese—Cantonese? Mandarin?— to realize that they may just be talking about what they had for lunch or who's dating whom.) And when we don't understand them, individual words become overloaded with significance.

We didn't get a sufficient sense of the need at times for a suspended judgment, a *hovering* over the meaning of a word in a particular line, a recognition that someone writing in a seemingly reasonable manner might not have suddenly lapsed into something incongruous—a false rhyme, a broken metre, a (to modern ears) screwy adjective.

#### IV

I have glossed some of the words in Boyd's sonnet. This may reduce slightly the romantic aura of the poem, the buzz of imperfect understanding (as my own was when I first read it, and for some time afterwards). But the power of statement, the muscular summarizing assertions about complex experiences increases as the literal meaning firms up.

How far there is a peculiarly "Scottish" sensibility in these voicings about Love, I am in no position to judge, being only one thirty-second part Scottish by birth (though with a good deal of Scottish romanticism at my second prep-school—Flodden Field, Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Hundred Pipers and a' and a'). If there's any *Cornish* poetry, or glamorous Cornish heroics, I've yet to hear about them. I myself am half Cornish. D.H. Lawrence *loathed* the Cornish. I guess there's

something to be said for myth-making about one's "roots." But my father didn't go in for it and I've never been to Scotland.

## V

Among the worthwhile things that we *could* have got from all that Latin, but didn't (or from preparation for the dreaded English Language paper in the final exams at Oxford) was a sense of the *expressive* structure of words and the importance of noting their etymologies when looking up their dictionary "meanings." I had to figure out for myself many years later, as I say elsewhere, that there are significant differences in *meaning* between terms like "investigate" and "look into," "exterminate" and "wipe out." And that poets with a reasonably full sense of the language make use of that.

But at least we did, back in high-school, encounter the juxtaposition of "incarnadine" and "making red" in Macbeth's great soliloquy.

## VI

A self-cautionary afterthought.

Some months ago my friend from highschool days, the lighting expert and Quaker peace-activist John Lynes, asked me to tape some technical passages from Chaucer in connection with a lecture that he was preparing. And when I went to the Web and a book or two for guidance, I found that in fact the guides sometimes differed.

It occurred to me that asking what *the* pronunciation of Chaucer would have been when he wrote is a bit like asking what *the* pronunciation of Yeats' "Among School Children" would have been in the 1930's. It would depend on where the speaker was coming from, wouldn't it, place-wise and class-wise? And London in the late fourteenth-century was home to people from a variety of British regions.

For that matter, what would be *the* right way of pronouncing the words in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"?

## VII

So it's indeterminacy time again, then, is it? No, simply a matter of an acceptable looseness and a variety of overlapping systems. And you can still say that some readings are more consistent, and more expressive, and sound better than others.

Good poems can be read aloud well in a variety of regional and cultural voices. Five of my seminar students once presented me at the end of the year, out of the blue, with a recording of Shakespeare's sonnet "That time of year thou may'st in me behold," which they had taped, one to each pair of lines, plus a final chorus, as a country-and-western. They sang it straight, and it really helped the poem.

I suspect that Charles Bronson—yes, the "action" movie actor—could read poetry well.

Certain kinds of regional or urban voices, with nasty nasal sounds in them and gulped consonants, can be a problem, as with my own. But one can overcome them, for poetry-reading purposes, with a tape-recorder and a bit of patience.

My own advice to students was: Keep enough air in your lungs, speak *beyond* the mike as if to someone on the other side of the room (meaning, don't *confide* to the mike and assume the volume can be brought up later), don't speed up as you approach the end of a line (hey, gotta get on to the next one), don't speak louder or faster when you want to convey emotion, and, if the verse is so-called regular verse, make sure that you haven't "lost" any syllables in a line.

## VIII

Yvor Winters talks importantly about some higher-level aspects of metre in his essay "The Audible Reading of Poetry." Personally, with one or two exceptions, especially "At the San Francisco Airport," I find his performances of his own poems a bit programmatically glum for my tastes, like a number of the photos of country people by Paul Strand. But he reads some poems by Williams, Pound, and Stevens magnificently, among them Pound's "Lament of the Frontier Guard," by which he was obviously deeply moved, and Williams' "The Sea Elephant," and his readings of Hopkins and some earlier poems are metrically impeccable.

His principles (at work also in readings by J.V. Cunningham) apply, with a bit of loosening, to a number of good readings by other poets, Frost and Stevens among them. Cunningham reads *best*, or at least with deepest feeling, a short passage from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*.

Spencer Tracy's advice to younger actors, according to one of them, was, "Know your lines, speak them to the other person—and *mean* them." Which presumably means knowing what's intended at every point, and not just trying to create a blur of emotion.

## The Sun Rising

Busy old fool, unruly Sun,  
Why dost thou thus,  
Through windows, and through curtains call on us?  
Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?  
Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide  
Late schoolboys, and sour 'prentices,  
Go tell Court-huntsmen that the King will ride,  
Call country ants to harvest offices;  
Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime,  
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

Thy beams, so reverend, and strong  
Why should'st thou think?  
I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,  
But that I would not lose her sight so long:  
If her eyes have not blinded thine,  
Look, and tomorrow late, tell me,  
Whether both th'Indias of spice and mine  
Be where thou left'st them, or lie here with me.  
Ask for those Kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,  
And thou shalt hear, All here in one bed lay.

She is all States, and all Princes, I,  
Nothing else is.  
Princes doe but play us; compared to this,  
All honor's mimic; All wealth alchimie.  
Thou sun art half as happy as we,  
In that the world's contracted thus;  
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be  
To warm the world, that's done in warming us.  
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;  
This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere.

John Donne (1572-1531)

### I

The greater immediacy of this poem over Donne's more ingenious "The Good Morrow" is partly formal, the varying line lengths and the placement of the lines being functional, as you can see if you left-align

them all, as I've had to do at one point while getting things ready for this publication.

The poem is a lesson in metrics.

Note how different the first two lines in each stanza feel. And yet the marvelously mock-arrogant, swift-moving "Busy old fool, unruly sun" and the lyrically affirmative "She's all states, and all princes, I" have the same number of syllables.

Note too how the flat, unqualified "Nothing else is." (i.e., exists) is made more dramatic by its departure from the question form in the lines in the two previous stanzas that correspond to it.

Note, also, how each stanza comes to a momentary completion at the end of the fourth line (an opening eight-syllable line, a four-syllable one, and two ten-syllable ones, with enclosing rhymes—sun/ run). And then we progress from eight syllables again ("Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide," etc.) through to the magnificent clinching affirmations of the two concluding ten-syllable lines in each stanza.

You also have, or at least I do, the curious feeling that the last two lines in each stanza are longer—have more syllables in them—than the preceding two, though in fact the syllable count is the same.

This partly comes from the difference between the brisk directness of "Call country ants to harvest offices," the slowing down with the more complex syntax of "Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime" (with an inescapable slight pause after the diphthong "knows" (in the previous line it's all short vowels), and then the four-step effect of "Nor hours, days, months," each word receiving slightly more stress, expressively, than the one before it.

## II

All this has the flow of natural speech, so that noting the features that I've done is simply a way of preparing the poem better for oral performance. The poem may feel "dramatic" (you're *there*), but you're not peeping through the keyhole at the two lovers in bed, or overhearing a blank verse soliloquy. This is a brilliantly *shaped* evocation of sexual exhilaration.



It also, to my mind, feels more persuasive than “The Good Morrow” since it’s not being addressed to Her (“What’s he talking about, I wonder? Ah, well, if it makes him happy! He’s such a sweetie”) but to the sun shining into their actual window, with no hint of any anxiety or approaching departure. So that this is not an aubade (a dawn poem of going back to your own cold bed), but a poem of marriage, maybe the morning after the first night of marriage.

And the real elements of the world outside the room— kings, princes, apprentices, schoolboys, harvesters, merchant ships—aren’t metamorphosed into so-called metaphysical conceits, like the famous pair of compasses and the beaten gold in “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning.” They’re simply transcended by the inner experience of the two lovers, no doubt naked, as was the custom then.

I see, on dipping into my two-volume *Norton*, that “offices” deserves to be glossed as chores or duties, and that the East Indies were where spices came from, the West Indies where gold came from. But in any event, I don’t think one’s going to form an image of ants sitting at desks. I assume that they’ll be carrying off fallen grain. Or are industrious peasantry.

Winters seems right to me in preferring “A Valediction; of My Name in the Window” to “A Valediction Forbidding Morning.”

The title “The Sun Rising” was appropriated by Carol Hoorn Fraser for a painting of hers in the late Fifties.

## Sur les Lagunes

Tra la, tra la, la, la, la laire!  
Qui ne connaît pas ce motif?  
A nos mamans il a su plaire,  
Tendre et gai, moqueur et plaintif.

L'air du Carnival de Venise,  
Sur les canaux jadis chanté  
Et qu'un soupir de folle brise  
Dans le ballet a transporté!

Il me semble, quand on le joue,  
Voir glisser dans son bleu sillon  
Une gondole avec sa proue  
Faites en manche de violon.

Sur une gamme chromatique,  
Le sein de perles ruisselant,  
La Vénus de l'Adriatique  
Sort de l'eau sous corps rose et blanc.

Les dômes, sur l'azur des ondes  
Suivant la phrase au pur contour,  
S'enflent comme des gorges rondes  
Que soulève un soupir d'amour.

L'esquif aborde et me dépose,  
Jetant son amarre au pilier,  
Devant une façade rose,  
Sur le marbre d'un escalier.

Avec ses palais, ses gondolas,  
Ses mascarades sur la mer,  
Ses doux chagrins, ses gaîtés folles,  
Tout Venise vit dans cet air.

Une frêle corde qui vibre  
Refait sur un pizzicato,  
Comme autrefois joyeuse et libre,  
La ville de Canaletto!

Théophile Gautier (1815-1872)

## **On the Lagoons**

Tra la, tra la, tra la la laire!  
Who doesn't know that melody?  
It captivated our mamas,  
Tender and gay, mocking and plaintive—

The air of the Venice carnival,  
Sung of old along the canals,  
And which a breath of sportive wind  
Has wafted into the ballet!

While it is played, I seem to see,  
Gliding along in a blue furrow,  
A gondola with its curious prow  
Shaped like the neck of a violin.

And then, on a chromatic scale,  
Her bosom shimmering with pearls,  
The Venus of the Adriatic  
Rises pink and white from the waves.

The domes across the azure water,  
Following the pure line of the phrase,  
Swell like the rounded forms of breasts  
Lifted by a sigh of love.

The skiff lands and deposits me,  
(Casting a line around a post),  
In front of a rose-coloured palace,  
On the marble of a flight of steps.

With its palaces, its gondolas,  
Its masquerades upon the sea  
Its sweet sorrows, its wild mirth  
All of Venice lives in that air.

A single string, vibrating,  
Restores on a pizzicato,  
As it once was, joyous and free  
The city of Canaletto!

Théophile Gautier (1815-1872)  
Tr. JF

## I

There are other lovely and/or memorable poems or parts of poems in Gautier's *Emaux et Camées* (*Enamels and Cameos*, 1852-1872) from which this poem comes, a book brought to many anglophone readers' attention by Ezra Pound's praise of it, and which I myself first read in a luxury French edition

"Carmen est maigre" ("Carmen is thin") is probably the best-known of them now, at least for English-speaking readers, again because of Pound. See those lines in his "To a Friend Writing on Cabaret Dancers,

'CARMEN EST MAIGRE, UN TRAIT DE BISTRE  
CERNE SON OEIL DE GITANA  
And 'rend la flamme',  
you know the deathless verses.

Pound did have an extraordinary ability to *dramatize* writing and make you want more of it.

But the three opening stanzas of "Ce que disent les hirondelles" ("What the swallows say") are unmatched in their succinct evocation of the *tristesse* of autumn.

And "Sur les lagunes," with its interpenetration of past and present, and its graceful eroticism, evokes brilliantly that theatrical venusian city, "joyeuse et libre," joyous and free, that demonstrated that it was possible to be in major decline ("Once didst thou hold the gorgeous East in fee"; said Byron) without succumbing to guilt and despair.

## II

My edition of *Emaux et Camées*, dated 1892, is the one with the "eau-forte par Jacquemart" (the frontispiece etching of Gautier's head) that Pound alludes to in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*. I found it in 1964 in the large student-oriented Gibert bookstore on the Boulevard St-Michel, at a normal used-book price. Sometimes works become semi-mythical when they're referred to, without any details, in another work, so that you're surprised to find them still existing, like some 1920s jazz musician you'd assumed was long dead.

A friend, reading my translation, suggested "which a *silly, sighing breeze*/Has wafted into the ballet," "The domes across the azure

*lagoon*,” and “on a *marble staircase*,” and reversing the order of the third and fourth lines of the poem.

But while we may indeed know that the water is the water of the lagoon, Gautier’s term *is* waves, and those *waves*, or at least that water in motion, are what your eyes see as you look across them. You don’t *see* lagoon, which is more wide-angle.

Similarly, when you step out from the gondola onto the *marble*, that’s what your feet feel.

Gautier also doesn’t seem to want adjectival clusters in which concepts overlap, as in “silly sighing breeze.” It’s still “un *soupir de folle brize*”<sup>^</sup>—a noun plus a very specific kind of breeze or wind that’s done the transporting or carrying. (Whether *soupir* here should really be “breath” or “sigh” is another matter.)

In the first stanza, the energy of the air/tune/melody would be diminished by putting its qualities *after* whatever it did to our mamas. We would also lose, slightly, the hint of its being a *sexual* charmer when we read the fourth line before the third. Poems exist in time. With each rereading, one has to shut out once again one’s knowledge of what is coming later.

### III

The adjectives in the poem, the signifiers of qualities, are all very simple. The charm comes in other ways.

Part of the weight of the poem results from the fact that every stanza is structured differently, almost as if each were a miniature poem. Look at the first lines in each, whether in the original or in the translation.

And look at the verbs—not a single “is” or “are,” all action, things being done to things—knowing, pleasing, carrying, playing, rising, following, swelling, landing, depositing, living, vibrating, restoring. A perfect demonstration of what Ernest Fenollosa said in his great essay “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” about the importance of active verbs, as he had discovered for himself while reading Shakespeare.

It might be interesting to compare the verbs in *Emaux et Camées* with those in Eliot's *Poems of 1920*, indebted as he and Pound explicitly were at that time to Gautier.

As to which indebtedness on Eliot's part, see, for example Gautier's "Carmen is thin, A touch of kohl/ Outlines her gypsy eye" and Eliot's "Grishkin is nice. Her Russian eye/Is underlined for emphasis." The opening line of "Sur les Lagunes" is quoted in the epigraph to Eliot's "Burbank with a Baedeker, Bleistein with a Cigar."

#### IV

Here is the opening of Gautier's "Ce que disent les hirondelles; chanson d'automne":

Déjà plus d'une feuille sèche  
Parsème les gazons jaunis;  
Soir et matin, la brise est fraîche,  
Hélas! les beaux jours sont finis!

On voit s'ouvrir les fleurs que garde  
Le jardin pour dernier trésor;  
Le dahlia met sa cocarde  
Et le souci sa toque d'or.

La pluie au bassin fait des bulles;  
Les hirondelles sur le toit  
Tiennent des conciliabules:  
Voici l'hiver, voici le froid.

#### **What the Swallows Are Saying; Autumn Song**

Already more than one dead leaf  
Is strewn upon the yellowed lawns.  
Morning and night, the breeze is cool.  
Alas, the fine days are all gone.

You see the flowers opening, kept  
By the garden as its final hoard;  
The dahlia puts on her cockade  
And the marigold her golden toque.

The rain makes bubbles in the pond.  
The swallows up upon the roof  
Hold their secret consultations:  
Here's winter. Here's the cold.

The *frisson* here, the literal shiver, is intensified in “**Hälfte des Lebens**” by the great German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) :

Mit gelben Birnen hänget  
Und voll mit wilden Rosen  
Das Land in den See.  
Ihr holden Schwäne,  
Und drunken von Küssen  
Tunkt ihr das Haupt  
Ins heilignichterne Wasser.

Weh mir, wo nehm ich, wenn  
Es Winter ist, die Blumen, und wo  
Den Sonnenschein,  
Und Schatten der Erde?  
Die Mauern stehn  
Sprachlos und kalt, im Winde  
Klirren die Fahnen.

### **Half of Life**

Brimful with yellow pears,  
and wild roses, the land hangs down  
into the lake,  
and drunk with kisses,  
O you lovely swans,  
you dip your heads  
in the pellucid holy water.

But I... I...,  
where, oh where, when it is winter,  
do I find the flowers,  
and the sunlight and shadows,  
of Earth?  
Walls stand there,  
voiceless and cold;

in the wind  
weathervanes clatter.

Tr. JF

The shivery last four lines are a perfect condensed imagist poem. But they wouldn't have their full weight without what's preceded them.

## V

The fall, I've realized, is more poetical than the spring?

Hopkins gave us "Spring," and Chaucer sent his pilgrims off in April, and of course there's that return-to-life stuff of the Elizabethans, and Hardy charmingly told us what weather the cuckoo liked.

But Keats' "To Autumn," the poems here, Lawrence's "The Ship of Death," Weill's "September Song," Rilke's "Autumn Day," Claire McAllister's lovely "Rites of Autumn," Ella Fitzgerald and Joe Pass's "'Tis Autumn"—a strong team.

Oh, and also that poem by Onakatomi Yoshinobu, as translated by Arthur Waley, that Winters calls "the finest English poem which we have from the Japanese:

The deer which lives  
On the evergreen mountain  
Where there are no autumn leaves  
Can know the coming of autumn  
Only by its own cry.

I guess the fall is more weighted with memories and residues. And what is at work slowly destroying the good things is more inexorable and alien than what flows up from the earth in league with the spring sun.



## **The Hunter**

He does not think that I haunt here nightly:  
How shall I let him know  
That whither his fancy sets him wandering  
I, too, alertly go?—  
Hover and hover a few feet from him  
Just as I used to do,  
But cannot answer the words he lefts me—  
Only listen thereto!

When I could answer he did not say them:  
When I could let him know  
How I would like to join in his journeys  
Seldom he wished to go.  
Now that he goes and wants me with him  
More than he used to do,  
Never he sees my faithful phantom  
Though he speaks thereto.

Yes, I companion him to places  
Only dreamers know,  
Where the shy hares print long paces,  
Where the night rooks go;  
Into old aisles where the past is all to him,  
Close as his shade can do,  
Always lacking the power to call to him  
Near as I reach thereto!

What a good hunter I am, O tell him!  
Quickly make him know  
If he but sigh since my loss befell him  
Straight to his side I go.  
Tell him a faithful one is doing  
All that love can do  
Still that his path may be worth pursuing,  
And to bring peace thereto.

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

## I

So skillfully is it done, and so functionally, that one may not notice at first that in this marvelous poem, which Winters rightly judges superior to “The Voice” from the same group, the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth rhyme words are identical from stanza to stanza.

“The Voice”, preferred by Leavis, is a straightforward, plangent articulation of loss and yearning, the yearning to see her again, for her to *be* there again::

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,  
Saying that now you are not as you were  
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,  
But as at first, when our day was fair,

And so on.

“The Haunter” is more complex.

## II

He (the speaker? the poet? Hardy?) is conscious of his own emotional inadequacy while she was alive, when he wasn’t speaking the words of love or wanting to do things together with her. And now we have a complex re-seeing of himself, missing her deeply, and wishing she were with him, and speaking to her remembered presence, a seeing presented with a novelistic firmness—he’s wandering restlessly, talking to her, revisiting places where they had been together.

And, in a major further imagining, she *is* there, speaking, thinking, feeling the words of the poem, attending on him, caring for him, close enough for him to touch if only she were visible.

So she is restored as loving him and forgiving him for his shortcomings, and also he (the *maker* of the poem) has recreated her, lovingly. It is a poem of comforting, with a sense of her *real* presence still, not the delusional sounds of the voice, or the more distanced and psychologically detailed figure of Hardy’s “The Going.”

### III

The last stanza of “The Haunter” is particularly poignant. And who is it who is being asked to do that telling and making? A deity? I don’t imagine so.

But I do think we have a recognition of the naturalness of yearning at times for someone else to *be* there, and how that yearning is a fitting and not a foolish stabilizing of values. So that we are not being invited to feel ironical here about the desire for something else, some “beyond,” but respectful towards her desire (which could, after all, be felt by someone who *wasn’t* dead) that he be comforted.

So it’s not as if death were simply a passing into a black hole with a door slammed shut on it, or an utterly empty space, the postulated empty space of mechanistic science in those days. Death involves memory, people live on in memory, the dead do not go away all at once like a candle flame snuffed out. As Virginia Woolf knew in *To the Lighthouse*.

### IV

The slightly rocking rhythm, with its alternation of the longer lines with their feminine endings and the shorter ones with their masculine ones (“nightly”/ “know”) is both comforting and functional.

We have a flow-forward of action in the longer ones—“He does not think that I haunt here nightly//That whither his fancy sets him wandering// Hover and hover a few feet from him// But never answer a word he lifts me.” And then a kind of pausing, not always the same, in the shorter ones— “How shall I let him know?// I too alertly go// Just as I used to do// Only listen thereto.

The repeated words in each stanza help to establish that this is not a narrative situation that is *leading* somewhere, to some kind of resolution or closure. He is there and she is here and it isn’t going to change. But it *isn’t* going to change, or at least her feelings for him aren’t going to.

It’s a kind of reverse love poem, in contrast to the far more common pattern of a male speaker swearing his own undying love and accusing

the lovee of unresponsiveness or fickleness—the fear of being no longer loved; perhaps, the fear of not being *worthy* of being loved.

There's something in Paul Tillich's theological writing somewhere about being accepted because unacceptable.

## V

“The Voice,” “The Haunter,” and “The Going” are three of the more than twenty “Poems of 1912/13,” written by Hardy shortly after the death of his first wife, Emma, all in different stanza forms, without a sonnet among them.

The cumulative effect could be called novelistic, or perhaps cinematic, at least if we're speaking of the script—a variety of “takes” upon a marriage that had been happy initially but fairly soon went sour.

Philip Larkin, whose favourite poet Hardy seems to have been, said that *she* had thought that she was marrying a successful young professional man and *he* had thought he was marrying an intelligent and well-read woman, and both were disappointed.

It is tempting, I imagine, to treat those poems as if they *were* part of a piece of fiction, and to build up the whole, or perhaps I should say *a* whole, relationship from them. And so strong is Hardy's poetic personality (with over seven hundred poems to his name) that holding back seems a bit, well, ungrateful maybe?

Especially with the added drama, as we know it, of his literary career—the slow start as a novelist, the big success when it came, the increasing melancholy of the fiction, especially *Tess of the Durbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, the return to poetry, the long and still responsive/creative old age, warmed by the admiration of much younger writers, including Ezra Pound and Robert Graves, neither of them notably tolerant of their elders.

Graves wrote a poem about Hardy's near-contemporary Robert Bridges (“The Laureate”) that opens with, “Like a lizard in the sun, though not scuttling/ When men approach, this wretch, this thing of rage, Scowls and sits rhyming in his horny age.” (No, “horny” doesn't have a sexual connotation here.)

But the poems of 1912/13 are mostly not all that good. Sorry, but they're *not*, useful though they may be as material for *The Hardy Story*. This isn't one of those situations like the one with J.V. Cunningham's hundred epigrams where some are much better than others but none, I think, is bad, so that you really can feel the play of intelligence without them falling into any kind of narrative or philosophical sequence.

The best of the 1912/13 poems seem to me to be, in addition to the two here, "After a Journey," "Without Ceremony," "Your Last Drive," and "The Shadow on the Stone." I wouldn't have known of "The Shadow on the Stone" if it hadn't been one of the ten poems that Winters and Kenneth Fields included in the impeccable selection of Hardy's poems in their anthology *Quest for Reality*.

## VI

However, those best ones are marvellous, particularly when taken together.

And they can be all the more moving if you have read Hardy's novels, particularly *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (his best), *Tess of the Durbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*, in which the biggest constant is a feeling of *unworthiness*, a sense of having committed some primary wrong, perhaps to another person, such that you have no *right* to subsequent happiness

Plus, too, a primitive supernaturalism, despite all the denials of it, wherein you, whether as character or spectator, just *know* that someone or some *thing* is going to make sure that you are punished—punished for the sin of *hubris*, of rising (perhaps not always by admirable means) above your social or moral status.

All of which can make the novels irritating, despite the famous passages of good writing in the first two that I named, and the solid construction of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. It's as if the exasperating Sue Bridehead of *Jude the Obscure*, struggling to be a liberated New Woman, but unable to sustain emotionally the burden of the heretical new ideas, had had a hand in their composition.

So it's a comfort to feel in Hardy's best poems, of which there are a substantial number, a mind that is working freely and without predetermined positions and feelings, and which owes that freedom in part to his quasi-musical enjoyment of the expressive possibilities of stanzaic forms, often forms of his own creating.

It's an especial pleasure experiencing not only the *flow* of feeling in the best of the 1912/13 poems, but also, when it happens, a kind of self-acceptance and self-forgiveness, a reviving, perhaps, of an earlier and better self, or of one of those selves.

## VII

In such poems, "After a Journey" prominent among them, it's as if we have, as we do at times in *To the Lighthouse*, "existential" renderings of particular *good* states of being, of moral consciousness (not necessarily entirely happy) whose worth is not affected by either what has come before them or what may come after them.

You can't ironize them, as you could the happiness voiced in Donne's "The Sun Rising" if you knew that the marriage went to hell the following year when he caught her *in flagrante* with the groom.

The poems at their best are the primary "Hardy" reality. If you came upon them without knowing anything about the author, they would not be enriched individually if you then read some of the novels.

And the Hardy who enjoyed being lionized by London society during the success of his early novels but kept his inner self always hidden, even in his letters, and who, as Larkin points out, destroyed documents and manipulated his image in the autobiography that appeared over the name of his second wife, is more elusive still.

If you want to have some idea of what that "inner" self was like, it's back to the poems, where it's most to be found.

"The Haunter" was a great comfort to me at one point. I can imagine its being comforting to others.

## **The Mower to the Glow-Worms**

Ye living lamps, by whose dear light  
The nightingale does sit so late,  
And studying all the summer-night,  
Her matchless songs does meditate;

Ye country comets, that portend  
No war, nor prince's funeral,  
Shining unto no higher end  
Than to presage the grasses fall;

Ye glow-worms, whose officious flame  
To wandering mowers shows the way,  
That in the night have lost their aim,  
And after foolish fires do stray;

Your courteous lights in vain you waste,  
Since Juliana here is come,  
For she my mind hath so displaced  
That I shall never find my home.

Andrew Marvell (1621-1678)

### **I**

One of the most charming older poems of serious play.

Tiny but magical natural phenomena—glow-worms, with a dash of nightingale and will-of-the-wisp—are recruited into a love poem as lamps, comets, and lantern-bearers (or torch-bearers), and bring with them the larger activities of the social world out there beyond the immediacy of this love-relationship, this man waiting for his lady love to come to him through the rural night. Singers work at their singing, comets reveal, or are thought to reveal, impending disasters, men make mistakes in their sexual seekings.

### **II**

Note the high-pitched diphthongs of the rhyme words in the first stanza (“ay” is higher pitched than “igh,” beginning nearer the front and top of the mouth and being more pinched). And then we have the

drop-down in the second stanza with “end” and “all.” And then a rise again to “ay” in *both* rhymes in the third stanza (unless there was a change in pronunciation over the years). And the lift-up continues at the start of the final stanza in the celebratory assertion about Juliana, with a comfortable drop down into what would surely have been “ohm”/ “ohm.”

### III

The final stanza is an especially lovely expression of happiness, no less real-feeling for being spoken by a conventional pastoral character.

He’s not one of those overworked shepherds, though, but a mower. And there are grasses there to fall at some point, perhaps to this particular mower’s scythe, but with a slight speech emphasis, surely, on “grasses,” it being at this point only the death of grasses, not of soldiers or princes. And nightingales sing, and glow-worms glow, and this is *real* country, and you can imagine being out there walking in it yourself at night.

The offered torch-bearer services aren’t needed because now that she’s come (physically? into his life?) he doesn’t care *where* he is.

### IV

Hardy liked glowworms, to judge from the memorable scene in *The Return of the Native* in which two characters throw dice at night out on the heath by their light, with, after a bit, a ring of free-grazing ponies looking in on them.

It is a *poetic* episode, a beautiful nexus of attitudes and feelings that it might be hard to put into plainer words but gives you the impression that it either evolved as it was being written, initially minus the glow worms, let alone the ponies, or had come in a flash, an *image* in the mind’s eye—gambling/ glow-worms/a peculiarly *human* competitiveness?



## V

You really can't avoid using the P word ("poetic") in that sense, can you? But what does it mean, or what do I myself mean when I use it? I still don't really know. And I certainly can't offer a definition.

But maybe there's a heightened feeling of being *there*, in that moment or brief stretch of time, with old structures falling away, and something new and unexpected and sort of marvelous or beautiful going on, what the French call *l'insolite*, the unusual, the unprecedented. Something that you can't simply arrive at methodically.

And oh dear, yes, there are indeed moments when a new and important configuration is suddenly seen or sensed in a glimpse, a flash (more overworked metaphors), as in "inspiration," a breathing into or inhaling.

In the movie *Topsy-Turvey* there's that lovely moment when the utterly "impossible" W.S. Gilbert, now by the looks of it terminally blocked in his efforts to come up with a fresh idea for a libretto, suddenly glimpses a shape that will, as it turns out, generate his and Arthur Sullivan's best work, *The Mikado*.

We're not given any details. All we see is the change, the relaxing, coming over that tense unlovely face, and the eyes widening slightly as if he's now glimpsing *beyond*, and a tiny smile starts to form. And then, pow!, we're given a sunburst of music from the completed opera in performance.

It's mysterious, but there's no mystification. He is holding the partly sheathed sword with which he's been imitating Japanese swordplay, after buying it at the exhibition where he and patient Kitty have seen a scrap of Kabuki-type theatre. And we know that somewhere for him now is the nexus "sword/beheading" that's at the centre of the plot.

## VI

I guess there's some overlap here with that state that J.V. Cunningham talks about in "Coffee" where the mind becomes temporarily unencumbered and unconstrained, and there's neither fear nor haste (both of them past- and future-driven), and something new can start

forming in the present. After which, of course, it's a lot of bloody hard work again.

## VII

There are words, “beautiful,” and “poetic” among them, that you really shouldn't try to define and tame and put to work dragging a cart. You can't construct a worthwhile aesthetic system around the idea of beauty. But woe to art—or to your aesthetic—if you never want to exclaim, in a sort of verbal equivalent of the spontaneous laugh that acknowledges that something's funny, “That's *beautiful!*”

## **In Time of Pestilence**

Adieu, farewell earth's bliss!  
This world uncertain is:  
Fond are life's lustful joys,  
Death proves them all but toys.  
None from his darts can fly;  
I am sick, I must die.

Lord, have mercy on us!

Rich men, trust not in wealth.  
Gold cannot buy you health;  
Physic himself must fade;  
All things to end are made;  
The plague full swift goes by;  
I am sick, I must die.

Lord, have mercy on us!

Beauty is but a flower  
Which wrinkles will devour;  
Brightness falls from the air;  
Queens have died young and fair;  
Dust hath closed Helen's eye;  
I am sick, I must die.

Lord, have mercy on us!

Strength stoops unto the grave,  
Worms feed on Hector brave;  
Swords may not fight with fate;  
Earth still hold ope her gate;  
Come, come! The bells do cry;  
I am sick, I must die.

Lord, have mercy on us!

Wit with his wantonness  
Tasteth death's bitterness;  
Hell's executioner  
Hath no ears for to hear  
What vain art can reply;  
I am sick, I must die.

Lord, have mercy on us!

Haste therefore each degree  
To welcome destiny;  
Heaven is our heritage,  
Earth but a player's stage.  
Mount we unto the sky;  
I am sick, I must die.  
    Lord, have mercy on us!

Thomas Nashe (ca; 1567–1601)

## I

Another great stanzaic poem. The pauses between the stanzas are increased and the move to the next one made more deliberate by the double refrain—the personal cry, the shared humanness.

A relatively general opening stanza of near-commonplaces (except for the refrain) gives way to the more concrete second stanza.

The rich, like their physicians, are as vulnerable as anyone else, and the plague goes past like the carts in which the dead are being taken for burial in a common pit. But it's goes *swiftly*, like one of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, or the scythe-bearing skeleton on a bony horse that figures in that comprehensive, nightmarish evocation of a whole variety of deaths and dyings, Pieter Brueghel the Elder's *The Triumph of Death*, a reproduction of which in an ornate gold-painted plaster frame I bought in a junk store and hung over the mantelpiece of my first undergraduate room.

Then comes the most famous stanza, with its swift progression from bodily beauty shriveling up like a flower, particularly one of those smooth-fleshed trumpet kinds, to the deaths of beautiful young (unnamed) queens, and thence to the most emblematic of beautiful queenly figures, Helen of Troy, with earth shoveled onto her dead face.

Could Nashe conceivably have read or heard of Villon's great ballade "Où sont les neiges d'antan?"—"Where are the snows of yesteryear?"—in which are named a number of the great and/or beautiful women gone like melted snow? Or is it simply a case of two poets feeling in the same way about the same phenomena? Not *everything* in a poem comes from another poem.

## II

There's more vigour in the fourth stanza. Heroic men too go down, the great Hector of the *Iliad* standing (in the present-tense) for many others. Death, the Enemy, is busily at work, the worms are feeding, the grave (or the way to hell?) is gaping, the death-knells are summoning.

(In the lower-right corner of *The Triumph of Death*, to which the main line of events in the picture winds down, a reveler caught at table has stood and is drawing his sword.)

And then, in the most personal stanza, even the writer, the man of wit and words, is merely, for Death, a figure as powerless as the impersonal executioner's pleading victim on the scaffold. I speak about some technical aspects of the stanza in "Powers of Style."

Finally, there's an earned and acceptable moral accommodation in a time of literal belief. Nothing can be done now but prepare one's mind for a death that will not in fact be a finality.

## III

When I mentioned Breughel's great picture (no doubt there were plenty of other works with some of that iconography), was I suggesting that the picture came or comes into my mind while reading or recalling the poem? Of course not. The two media are so different, and the poem is so utterly without colour and novelistic particularity.

But experiencings can overlap.

One of Eliot's poems from just before *The Waste Land*, which I'd read on my own in high-school, opens with, "Webster was much possessed by death/And saw the skull beneath the skin." I myself, while listening four or five years later to some observations by W.W. Robson in one of his dramatic set of lectures on the Metaphysicals, wrote in my notebook:

Rotten teeth and coated tongue  
Moulded epigram and song.  
Genius in a single breath  
Made report, and stank, of death.

## IV

The famous line “Brightness falls from the air,” with its mysteriously dwindling down or diffused luminosity, got emended at one point to “Brightness falls from the *hair*,” which if anything required even more effort to realize the physical process involved.

It was finally re-emended, I think by Wesley Trimpi, back to its original form, but referring now to the belief that the fall of comets produced sickness, so that even queens can die prematurely. This is, after all, a time of *pestilence*.

I’ve no idea whether that suggestion has found general acceptance.

But as with that hair in Rossetti’s “The Woodspurge,” there seems in principle to be something to be said for not having to go into an elaborate dance of the mind when you come to a word or a bit of phrasing while reading a poem out loud. What you think you see there, linguistically, ought to be in keeping with the practice elsewhere in the poem.

I am morally certain, for example, knowing Hopkins’ voiced desire (in letters) to *communicate*, that Winters was right when, after recalling some of the over-cerebral interpretations of the difficult sestet of “The Windhover,” he remarked, deadpan:

I am no great philologist, myself, but in my casual reading of the more obvious dictionaries I have observed that the word *buckle*, in Scots and northern English, sometimes means *to marry*... I am not aware that Hopkins ever made a notation of this meaning of the word, though he may have done so; but we know that Hopkins was inordinately fascinated with folk locutions and examined them endlessly... (*The Function of Criticism*, p.134)

## V

A bad habit of the would-be Symbolist or mega-symbolizing mind, whether operating critically or, as with poets like Hart Crane and Dylan Thomas, creatively, is to want to have individual words and phrases supercharged with meaning so that they can expand instantly like an airbag in a car (“The dice of drowned men’s bones he saw

bequeath/ An embassy,” “Button your bodice on a hump of splinters,/ My camel’s eye will needle through the shroud,” and so forth).

It is a habit encouraged, perhaps, by an imperfect knowledge of French.

But the poetry of Baudelaire and Verlaine, at least, didn’t work in that fashion, and the mysterious mood of a poem like Rimbaud’s “Larme,” masterfully translated by Wyatt Mason, is a cumulative affair and not a matter of some “key” lurking in this or that word which, once found, permits, ta-da! a decoding of the message.

In *Les ‘Tombeaux’ de Mallarmé*, in which he looks very scrupulously at Mallarmé’s diction and syntax, Gardner Davies shows convincingly that that at times unspeakably difficult poet was working closer than might be assumed to a prose-sense sense, but in a fashion that deliberately prevented any easy extraction of a “meaning” from the words.

In a note in *Forms of Discovery*, after remarking that “Mallarmé is one of the most grammatical of poets, though his syntax is seldom French,” Winters offers an again, to my mind, entirely persuasive translation and glossing of the exceptionally difficult sestet of “Tout orgueil fume-t-il du soir.”

I was sneakily pleased recently to find Anthony Thwaite, a real poet and all, complicating Baudelaire’s “Le Cygne” (“The Swan”) in the third stanza by translating “*baraques*” (here, surely, “sheds”) as “barracks” (in French, “*caserne*”) and giving us, “at the window, Their Majesties’ bric-à-brac,” leaving us wondering just what we’re meant to be visualizing. Which in fact appears to be a construction site. I had found the passage perplexing myself earlier.

## VI

Some editorial interventions can make a poem *worse*.

I cannot believe that Emily Dickinson, had they been published during her lifetime, would have wanted her poems to appear with those ridiculous dashes, in the place of normal punctuation marks, that Thomas H. Johnson foisted upon them, making you proceed through the poems in a series of hiccups.

The artist Carol Hoorn Fraser, born in Superior, Wisconsin in 1930, wrote poems as an undergraduate at Gustavus Adolphus College. In the manuscripts of some of them she uses small dashes instead of commas, and I'm sure this wasn't because she aspired to be Emily Dickinson but because she was writing fast and it's easier to make a tiny dash than a comma when you're doing so. I assume that this was a not uncommon American practice.

But I did, after working at transcribing them, written as they were on a variety of pieces of paper, some of them with erratic punctuation and lineation, occasional illegibilities, and at times the replacement of struck-through words with ones that didn't fit into the syntax at that point, wind up with a much enhanced respect for the labours of textual editors.

The finished-up poems in typescript or in a student magazine were without those errors, and the dashes were commas.



### **Au Cabaret-Vert, cinq heures du soir**

Depuis huit jours, j'avais déchiré mes bottines  
Au cailloux des chemins. J'entrais à Charleroi.  
—Au Cabaret-Vert: je demandai des tartines  
De beurre et du jambon qui fût à moitié froid.

Bienheureux, j'allongeai les jambes sous la table  
Verte: je contemplai les sujets très naïfs  
De la tapisserie.—Et ce fût adorable,  
Quand la fille aux tétons énormes, aux yeux vifs,

—Celle-là, ce n'est pas un baiser qui l'épeure!—  
Rieuse, m'apporta des tartines de beurre,  
Du jambon tiède, dans un plat colorié,

Du jambon rose et blanc parfumé d'une gousse  
D'ail,—et m'emplit la chope immense, avec sa mousse  
Que devrait un rayon de soleil arriéré.

Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891)

### **At the Green Tavern, 5.00 p.m.**

For a whole week I'd been wrecking my boots  
On those stony roads. I came into Charleroi,  
To the Green Tavern; I ordered slabs of bread,  
Buttered, and some warmed-up ham.

Contentedly, I stretched my legs out under the green  
Table. I studied the artless patterns  
On the wallpaper. And it was lovely  
When the girl with the big tits and sparkling eyes—

You wouldn't scare that one with a kiss!—  
Laughing, brought me the buttered bread,  
And the warm ham, on a coloured dish

(Pink-and-white ham, scented with a clove  
Of garlic), and filled a huge beer mug for me, whose foam  
Was turned to gold by a late sunbeam.

Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891)

Tr. JF

## I

I also talk about this sonnet a bit in “Powers of Style.”

It’s fascinating how, as you move through it, you don’t know where it’s going, and first expect maybe a bit of adventure (was he on the run?) and then, maybe, a bit of sexual adventure, and then you find that the sentence that starts in the seventh line keeps going, sweeping over the division between octave and sestet (even muting slightly the first sentence in the sestet by making it parenthetical), and ending up with the foam on a beer-mug, which may have been a freebie, since if he’d ordered beer too he’d presumably have said so.

It’s a lovely poem. In his 1918 essay on what were at that time modern French poets, Pound said that the art of poetry hadn’t advanced since then.

You don’t forget that green table, the pink-and-white ham, the touch of garlic, and how the beer (poured no doubt from a pitcher) comes up inside the *big* beer mug, probably porcelain or earthenware, and the foam as it rises above the rim is caught by a ray of late-afternoon sunshine and glows golden.

The comfort of primary things. Also a sonnet very skillfully managed for expressive purposes.

## II

To judge from Google (a term becoming as generic for me as The Dictionary is for freshmen), Charleroi, in Belgium’s biggest coal district, was heavily industrialized by then—iron, steel, glass—and not at all pastoral or idyllic.

A *cabaret* (nothing to do with song-and-dance here) was what my dictionary describes as “an inferior kind of wineshop, tavern, pot-house....” “Inn” makes it sound too much like one of those picturesque English rural pubs. Hence my “tavern.” *A moitié froid* and *tiède* may technically mean lukewarm, but there seems to be some French culinary distinction here about degrees of warmth, and you wouldn’t go into an English pub and order some nice *lukewarm* ham, please. Warm is warm—comfortable.

A friend suggested substituting “lounged at the table” and “Gilded by the declining sun” for what I have here. But “lounged” is an abstraction from Rimbaud’s precise physicality. So is “declining sun” vis-à-vis “rayon de soleil”/ray of sun/sunbeam. The sun’s declining is what we *infer* from the facts that it’s five in the evening and that the sunbeam is “late” and presumably, if it can penetrate into the room, coming from relatively low in the sky.

Until I settled down recently with two or three translations by others and a dictionary, I’d assumed that “arriérée” meant “from behind,” and had written, “Which a ray of sunlight lit up from behind.” Which I still like, but it’s *wrong*.

### III

I concluded years ago that it’s *vastly* preferable, even in a seminar, to muddle around in the original, however faultily, than to examine only translations.

Pound gave you courage for that, both in his own bold translatings, some of them partly *mistranslatings* but coherent good poems in their own right, and in his assertion, which Leavis pounced on and savaged, that you only need to know a few hundred words in a language in order to read this or that poem.

But Leavis was talking about how to *teach* reading, and Pound about how to *read* (in order to write), and he had enough truth there to make it relevant to teaching reading too. For if you *do* know, or have dictionaried, enough of the words in a dual-text edition, you’re in a much better position to feel your way into this or that poem.

I’m glad I taught myself enough Italian at age eighteen to be able to read the opening lines of Dante’s *Inferno*—“*Nel mezzo del camin di nostra vita/ Mi ritrovai per una selv’ oscura/Que la diretta via era smarita*”—and recognize their unadorned clarity of a sort that you only got in English in lines like “They flee from me that sometime did me seek/ With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.”

I’m also glad (though it came much later) to be able to read, with relatively literal understanding, “Da stieg ein baum! O reine ubersteigung/ O Orpheus singt. O hoher baum in ohr,” the start of the first sonnet in Rilke’s very great *Sonnets to Orpheus*. For what you

*can't* get without that kind of minimal consciousness is how the lines in a poem go, the kinds of pace and weight, the rhythms, the play of syntax, so important in Rilke.

#### IV

It occurred to me years ago, though I didn't dare say it professionally, that students of "English" agonizing for hours over the Old English text of *Beowulf* would have been far better off being led through enough ancient Greek to have been able to get a feeling for the opening twenty or so lines of *The Odyssey*. As it is, people in English go on talking about "Homer" as if they knew his texture the way they know the texture of *Paradise Lost*.

I don't imagine that you could persuade any Classicists of this, any more than you could persuade professors of French that you had any right to talk about French poems unless you "knew" French—which of course they would be happy to instruct you in if you would enroll in their classes.

But muddling around in the original with a dictionary, and comparing translations, can help to inhibit that process by which you infer the meaning of words from the "meaning" of the poem, as you've loosely extrapolated it, a process like that by which a bad actor or reciter extrapolates a generalized mood (angry, ironical, joyous, whatever) and then overlays the whole text with it.

#### V

A bit more, just a bit, about words. Sometimes a dash of scholarship pays off.

I had been uneasy about that "tapisserie" that he was gazing at in the tavern while waiting for the food to arrive.

The translator for the Penguin edition, Oliver Bernard, gives it as "wallpaper." Wyatt Mason, in his more swinging translation in his *Rimbaud Complete* in the Modern Library, has him looking at "a tapestry." *What*, I wondered, would be likely to have been on the walls of a Belgian tavern in an industrial town in 1870?

For you do, don't you, want to be able to envisage, at least somewhat, what's going on in this at other points very precise poem, with its ripped boots, green table, buttered bread, garlic-scented ham, etc? Would there in fact have been wallpaper back then? Or might there have been wall hangings of some kind? But if so, *what* kind? Crude embroidery? Appliqué?

## VI

Well, the Littré *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1885), close enough to the time of the poem, informs me that, as a secondary meaning ("tapestry" being the primary one), "It's also used of all kinds of materials ... serving to cover or decorate the walls of a room."

And *then*, in Henri Clouzot's *Le papier peint* [wall-paper] *en France du XVIIe au XIXe siècle* (1931), I found that wall-paper in fact progressed from low to high, beginning as something that in the 17th century would serve "to cover the rooms of artisans, wardrobes, or the insides of cupboards" and which was made by humble wood-engravers (who also made playing cards) and would be patterned with "grotesques" and with medleys of flowers, fruits, animals, and little figures. Wallpaper, in other words, was originally what you had when you couldn't afford something better.

Given the persistence of cultural forms, that settles it well enough for me, unless I were to make enquiries of someone who knows the history of design, such as a stage designer. So wallpaper it is. No doubt this point has long since been settled somewhere by someone more scholarly than myself.

## The Woodspurge

The wind flapped loose, the wind was still,  
Shaken out dead from tree and hill:  
I had walked on at the wind's will,—  
I sat now, for the wind was still.

Between my knees my forehead was,—  
My lips, drawn in, said not Alas!  
My hair was over in the grass,  
My naked ears heard the day pass.

My eyes, wide open, had the run  
Of some ten weeds to fix upon;  
Among those few, out of the sun,  
The woodspurge flowered, three cups in one.

From perfect grief there need not be  
Wisdom or even memory;  
One thing then learnt remains to me,—  
The woodspurge has a cup of three.

D.G. Rossetti (1828-1882)

This poem felt interestingly hallucinatory to me for several years, as if he was merging with nature (his hair sort of floating off), and hearing things with a preternatural acuity.

However, I'm certain now that he is sitting on the ground bowed forward, that his hair, worn long in the mid-Victorian fashion, is falling into the probably long grass, and that his ears are exposed. So, no, this isn't some kind of quasi-mystical out-of-body experience.

It also took me a while to register that part of the strangeness of the poem, its slowed-down feeling, is that all four lines in each stanza rhyme on the same sound, so that we have a diminished sense of moving forward. I don't offhand recall any other poem, at least in English, where this happens.

The poem is unique in Rossetti's oeuvre (as is "Mishka" in John Gray's) and, I have little doubt, in Victorian poetry generally. It is a kind of proto-Symbolist poem, as you can see in Edward Engelberg's excellent anthology *The Symbolist Poem*.

Very precise details are used to evoke, here entirely credibly, an inner state that is not itself explained or discussed, beyond our knowing—in this instance— that it's total grief. Focusing on a physical object out there seems entirely credible as a way of temporarily anaesthetizing the mind.

We are also, I am quite sure, not being invited to start allegorizing the experience (aha! gotcha, SYMBOL!) when we note that the woodspurge (what an unattractive name, and not in fact a delicate plant) has a cup of *three*.

I don't know anything about the provenance of the poem, except that it was by who it was by—Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Pre-Raphaelite painter and poet. It could be the only poem by an otherwise unknown writer, and it would be no less good.

So far as I could see when skimming through Rossetti's collected poems, he wrote nothing else in the least like it, his normal style being much more conventionally literary.

## **Ballade des Pendus**

Freres humains qui après nous vivez,  
N'ayez les cuers contre nous endurcis,  
Car, se pitié de nous povres avez,  
Dieu en aura plus tost de vous mercis.  
Vous nous voiez cy attaches cinq, six:  
Quant de la chair, que trop avons nourrie,  
Elle est pieça devorée et pourrie,  
Et nous, les os, devenons cendre et pouldre.  
De nostre mal personne ne s'en rie,  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

Se freres vous clamons, pas n'en devez  
Avoir desdaing, quoy que fusmes occis  
Par justice. Toutefois, vous sçavez  
Que tous hommes n'ont pas bon sens rassis;  
Excusez nous, puis que sommes transsis,  
Envers le fils de la Vierge Marie,  
Que sa grace ne soit pour nous tarie,  
Nous preservant de l'infernale fouldre.  
Nous sommes mors, ame ne nous harie;  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

La pluye nous a debuez et lavez,  
Et le soleil dessechiez et noircis;  
Pies, corbeaulx, nous ont les yeux cavez,  
Et arraché la barbe at les sourcis.  
Jamais nul temps nous ne sommes assis;  
Puis ça, puis la, comme le vent varie,  
A son plaisir sans cesser nous charie,  
Plus becquetez d'oiseaulx que dez a couldre.  
Ne soiez donc de nostre confrairie,  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

Prince Jhesus, qui sur tous a maistrie,  
Garde qu'Enfer n'ait de nous seigneurie;  
A luy n'ayons que faire ne que souldre.  
Hommes, icy n'a point de mocquerie;  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

François Villon (1431-?)



## **Ballade of the Hanged**

O brother men who live on after us,  
Don't let your hearts set stonily against us;  
If you yourselves can pity us poor wretches  
God will the sooner have mercy upon you.  
You see us dangling here, three, four, five, six,  
As for the flesh which we indulged so much,  
It's shredded, eaten up, and rotted away.  
And we the bones will soon be dust and ashes.  
Let nobody make fun of our misfortune,  
But pray to God that he forgive us all.

If we claim you as brothers, don't reject us  
Scornfully, though we were put to death  
By Justice, for you know that as things are  
Not everyone is born with the same good sense.  
Plead for us, now that we are dead and gone,  
To the son of the ever-blesséd Virgin Mary  
That his compassion not cease flowing for us,  
Preserving us from the thunderbolts of Hell.  
We are the dead, let none of you torment us,  
But pray to God that he forgive us all.

The rain has leached and softened up our skin,  
And the sun shriveled it and burned it black.  
Magpies and crows have winkled out our eyes  
And ripped away our eyebrows and our beards.  
Never at any moment have we been still,  
Spun here and there while the wind shifts about  
As the whim takes it, never ceasing to mock us,  
Pecked and pocked by birds worse than a thimble.  
Don't *you* become one of our company,  
But pray to God that he forgive us all.

Prince Jesus who has dominion over all ,  
Keep Hell from claiming lordship over us,  
There truly isn't anything we owe it.  
O men, there's nothing here for mockery,  
But pray to God that he forgive us all.

François Villon  
Tr. J.F.

## I

The title of Villon's best-known poem seems to be up for grabs—variously “L’Epitaphe Villon,” “Ballade des pendus,” “L’Epitaphe en forme de ballade que feit Villon pour luy et pour ses compagnons, s’attendant etre pendu avec eulx” (“The epitaph in the form of a ballade that Villon made for himself and his companions while waiting to be hanged with them”), and, for Galway Kinnell in his 1982 double-text edition, simply “Ballade.”

“Gibbet” (where bodies were left on display *after* being hanged) would be more accurate than “gallows” for English readers. The speaker and his five companions here are evidently now simply skeletons and have been up there a good while. It is “nous les os,” we bones, that are speaking. Pound wrote “A Villonaud: Ballad of the Gibbet,” but used “gallows” in the text. I’ve played it safe with “hanged” as more personal.

The idea of Villon sitting there in prison waiting to be hanged and whiling away the time with a poem, or at least this very polished one, sounds apocryphal. Yeats didn’t pace the floor of his new house that night composing “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory.” Walter Raleigh wrote a poem in the Tower of London before he was executed, as I recall, but it was simpler.

In any event, though, the possibility of *being* hanged, and the aftermath for the dangling body, is a grim reality in Villon’s masterpiece.

## II

Typing out the poem was a pleasure, since this fifteenth-century French contains no accent marks apart from the two cedillas. Why couldn’t they have kept things that way?

The spelling appears to be more phonetic, too. The rhyme-word ‘S’s are evidently meant to be sounded (“endurcis” rhyming with “six”). I don’t know if the S’s in words like “nostre” and “tost” (tôt) were sounded, or the L’s in words like “vueille” and “absouldre” (absoudre), though no doubt I could find out if I were to spend more time in the library stacks. Presumably we can glimpse here the French of Paris in the process of losing some of the Mediterranean fullness.

The original manuscript, Kinnell reports, was virtually without punctuation. The punctuation here comes from the scholarly-seeming French edition that I used.

Evidently a few words are in scholarly dispute.

“Debuer,” for instance, could, it appears, mean “washed with lye” but what would no doubt have been a familiar process then would draw too much attention to itself here in English.

I imagine that what would have been evoked for French readers up until fairly recently would have been the washerwomen boiling, pounding, and soaking clothes in a communal washing-place.

We ourselves saw it still going on in “our” Provence village in the 1960s. It figures prominently in Zola’s best novel, *L’Assommoir*.

### III

The ballade form, in its several manifestations, is a given—three stanzas with the same rhymes in each, the same line at the end of each stanza, the reversal in the middle of each stanza, the concluding *envoi* repeating elements in the preceding stanzas.

So the art of writing a ballade is partly a matter of achieving *naturalness* in a highly stylized form, with everything anchored to, or tied together by, the repeated refrain.

The version here, technically a ballade supreme, is more difficult than the basic one with eight-line stanzas and a four line *envoi*.

### IV

Ballades in modern English have tended to be light and in octosyllabic lines, emphasizing the play and cleverness, and being, perhaps, more song-like, as is Villon’s own lovely “Où sont les neiges d’antan?” (“Where are the snows of yesteryear?”)

In “Freres humains” the movement is slow and not at all playful. The hemmed-in-ness of the form answers to the plight of the hanged, who have no forward-reaching expectations beyond the hope of not being condemned to hell.

## V

The stanzas are individuated, too.

In the first, we have the firmness of person-to-person statement, opening with a command. The lines are mainly self-sufficient syntactically. The first two are a complete unit, as are the next two. The one after that is free-standing, and the last three are a unit, the second and third of them self-sufficient.

In the second stanza, there's more vulnerability, a greater felt need to argue and plead. They need help, they want prayers made on their behalf, they hope for divine mercy. The first sentence occupies two and a half lines, the next a line and a half. Then we have a run of four lines, leading out and down into hell.

In the third stanza, we have the sheer corporeality of it all.

## VI

To put things less formally, in the first stanza we're presented with the situation—the skeletons, the gawking or joking visitors—and a demand for a recognition of a shared humanity.

In the second, there's a fuller analysis of the ethical situation—an acknowledgment of having no *right* to sympathy, but a hope nevertheless for mercy, including the mercy of Jesus, since otherwise there will be the torments of hell.

In the third, the dreadful physicality of it all is presented in such a way that the six men almost seem to have been *alive* during those depletions.

Finally, in the envoi, there's a reaching out directly to Jesus, going over the heads of the more or less Decent Citizenry.

## VII

In the fall of 1949, as an unhappy undergraduate, I wrote the following. It didn't come at a sitting, though, as I had erroneously remembered, and I have conflated eleven slightly varying drafts of it and solved an irritating syntactical problem with line eight.

## Romance in Execution Dock

This captain's heart in error was grown so black  
That even the children, pausing, cried alack,  
And loud the public winds roared where he swung.  
Drowned were the tales that wagged that angry tongue,  
Of seven-day hungers and waves tall as a house,  
While the gulls deftly made ridiculous  
The gaudy splendours of a long disease.  
And all the journeying terrors of the seas  
Shrank to the confines of a tattered chart,  
Which shows none of the routes, now, of a heart  
Tense with its fevers and the crew's distress,  
But only, with baroque inventiveness,  
Hides the poor ragged dead by whispering  
Of golden oceans where the mermaids sing.

I showed it to George Steiner, a staircase or two away from me in college, who showed me one of his own poems (I thought some of the metaphors were overwrought), and he noted, as I did, the barely disguised echo here of John Crowe Ransom's "Captain Carpenter" at the start, and objected that gulls aren't deft but fierce, and threw up his hands in dismay, literally, at the mermaids. I tried replacing them with dolphins, but it didn't seem to work.

I don't recall whether he mentioned the general Robert Gravesishness, or the echo of Auden's "And, taller than a tree,/ Hold sudden death before our eyes." The poem is basically Graves with trimmings.

It's bad, of course. You can see the harm done, as in Yeats' early poetry, by an over-figurativeness that prevents you from getting further into whatever it is that's really bothering you.

But I'm interested to see that back then, as now, I was concerned with the dwindling down of experience, and the reader's possible unawareness of the intense muddling that can go into the creating of certain kinds of order.

## VIII

I had bought Villon's collected poems during two exchange months in France, mostly Paris, in the summer of 1946.

But I am morally certain that his great poem wasn't consciously in my mind when I wrote "Execution Dock" three years later.

You didn't have to go to Villon to learn about gallows and gibbets. One of the Wiltshire Downs, a short drive from where my grandparents lived, was Inkpen Beacon, and on the top of it, as I learned at an early age, had stood the Inkpen Gibbet. A single post still marked the spot, ominous-looking as the car wended its way up-hill.

John Schlesinger and Alan Cook had made an amateur feature movie in the summer of '49 about a couple who were hanged there, and they showed it that fall.

Execution Dock was the name for a spot on the Thames at London where pirates were hanged, according to, what? *Treasure Island*? Conan Doyle's pirate stories? And of course, as a kid in London, I knew of Tyburn Tree on the north-east corner of what is now Hyde Park, to which highwaymen like Jack Shepherd were taken in a cart to be hanged. I could go on.

Though I dislike such terms, I guess you might say that the gallows/gibbet is one of the major archetypal images, not because it sends the mind racing out along literary paths, but because you can immediately enter empathetically into the experience of being hanged yourself before a crowd of your fellow citizens and then left there exposed for all to see. Not all literary influences come *from* literature.

## IX

Here is another well-known and remarkable poem on this topic:

### **Three Things There Be**

Three things there be that prosper up apace  
And flourish, while they grow asunder far,  
But on a day they meet all in one place,  
And when they meet, they one another mar.

And they be these: the wood, the weed, the wag.  
The wood is that which makes the gallow tree;  
The weed is that which strings the hangman's bag;  
The wag, my pretty knave, betokeneth thee.

Mark well, dear boy, whilst they assemble not,  
Green springs the tree, hemp grows, the wag is wild,  
But when they meet, it makes the timber rot;  
It frets the halter, and it chokes the child.

God bless the child.

Walter Raleigh (1552-1618)

Remarkable how? I guess partly for its cool acknowledgment of a natural inevitability in the order of things. These are things that happen, and they can happen to you, to me, to anyone, dearest son, charming though you may be personally, if you have breached the social order.

It's a nice world, partly. Things grow and flourish, and you can have fun while you're young. And a father can be a good father, addressing his son as an intelligent being, separate from himself, and presumed capable of coping with grimmer facts. But none of this can protect or save.

None of the normal pageantry and horror is here. No judges, jailers, spectators, not even the conventionally awesome masked executioner, but simply, by implication, a functionary walking or riding to work with his equipment in a string bag.

And what a formidable progression through the stanzas!

In the first, you're listening, it's general, what's going on? is this a riddle poem? The second looks as if it will be more of the same, the riddle explained, the parallelism kept up. But that's just the first line. Suddenly the wood is the gallows tree, a term going back, I see from my dictionary, to Angle-Saxon times.

And then we have the instant locating in the present with that string bag. And the clinching, shocking solving of the third element in the riddle as the stanza and line end with "thee."

The third stanza stretches the two halves of the emotional equation—the lively livingness (greenness, the plant that also furnishes the hangman's rope, the funning); but also the deadening and injuring of things, in a way that makes the tree and the plant seem also, to some

slight degree, victims of the process by which crimes require laws which require implements for their enforcement.

It chokes the child. Brilliant! The wag, the smartass, who's been running wild, may not now be literally a child, but you feel the tenderness of the still young throat that's being choked. And maybe a child can literally be hanged, so that it's that kind of dangerous world.

My dictionary also tells me that "wag" was short for "waghalter." It has taken me far too many decades to appreciate the beauties of the dictionary.

I have given here the version in which I first read the poem. There is another one in which the appended phrase "God bless the child," with its quiet evocation of the child now, is replaced with a conventionally moralistic couplet.

To my mind this pretty well wrecks the poem by converting it into one of those "Shakespearean" sonnets whose supposedly real point comes at the end, the preceding particularities serving to illustrate or necessitate it.

## X

I was never A Poet. But it can be helpful to a teacher to have some idea of what it's like to create even a bad poem.



## They Flee from Me

They flee from me, that sometime did me seek  
With naked foot, stalking in my chamber.  
I have seen them gentle, tame, and meek,  
That now are wild, and do not remember  
That sometime they put themselves in danger  
To take bread at my hand; and now they range  
Busily seeking with a continual change.

Thanked be fortune it hath been otherwise  
Twenty times better; but once, in special,  
In thin array, after a pleasant guise,  
When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall,  
And she me caught in her arms long and small,  
Therewith all sweetly did me kiss,  
And softly said: Dear heart, how like you this?

It was no dream; I lay broad waking.  
But all is turned, thorough my gentleness,  
Into a strange fashion of forsaking;  
And I have leave to go of her goodness:  
And she also to use newfangleness.  
But since that I so kindly am served,  
I would fain know what she hath deserved.

Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542)

### I

This must by now be one of the best-known poems in the language, but, like “The River Merchant’s Wife,” it never grows stale. As Ezra Pound remarked, great literature is news that *stays* news. Like Rossetti’s “The Woodspurge,” “They Flee from Me” comes uncluttered by “period” stylistic baggage.

The only adjectives preceding nouns in it are “naked,” “loose,” “pleasant,” “strange”—no colour, no colour anywhere. No word-painting descriptions of “them,” either, or “her”—only naked feet, upright postures (“stalking,” like deer, with *their* precisely placed little feet), long slender arms.

## II

We have *movement* in that first stanza—fleeing (rapid), seeking (slower), stalking (slower still), wildness again (a space opening up), approaching, taking held bread, ranging again, ranging *restlessly*.

Then in the second stanza there's the lovely recalled slowed-down particular occasion, and she's comfortably *there* with him, not having to be enticed, letting the loose gown drop (nothing under it, obviously), and holding him, and kissing him sweetly, and saying, softly, those loving words.

All a bit dream-like, but *not* a dream. He really *was* lying there, seeing her come into his room in that thin gown, probably in the afternoon, since there's nothing about light and dark and candles in the poem, so probably he was resting.

But the relationship, and it *was* one, not just one of the transitory affairs, has terminated, he having been, what? not forceful enough, and she, a real self, having released *him* and asserted her right to her own new relationships. And how has it gone for *her* since then?

## III

Notice the flow-forward in “They flee from me that sometime did me seek,/ With naked foot, stalking in my chamber, “ and in “To take bread at my hand; and now they range,/ Busily seeking with continual change,” and in ““When her loose gown from her shoulders did fall/ and she me caught in her arms long and small,/ Therewith all sweetly did me kiss,/ And softly said: “Dear heart, how like you this?”—lengthenings on the page and when spoken.

Note also that in present-day English some of the verbs in the first stanza would be a phrase or a more Latinate word rather than the single vigorous one here—“flee”/ “stay away from” (or “avoid”), “seek”/ “came looking for me,” “range”/ “roam around.”

## IV

The poem is remarkable for its freedom from the conventional Cupid's-dart, Venus'-servant, Love's-slave apparatus, the “Yew gotta love *me* 'cos *Ah* loves *yew*” ethos. There doesn't seem to me to be an

“ought” there at all. He’s in a melancholy present recalling a happier and lustier time past, with some puzzlement as to how to conceptualize the changes. Wistful, might one say?

I know it’s been argued that he’s feeling bitter towards her, but he certainly isn’t presenting himself as Sir Truelove Faithful in the first stanza, and if it were demonstrated convincingly that the “kindly” in the third one is intended ironically, or that the alternate meaning of “according to kind,” i.e., according to the nature of Woman, is the right one here, the poem would be weaker because more conventional and morally a bit obtuse.

But I am not sure that it *could* be demonstrated (this isn’t like the hair in “The Woodspurge”), and in any event I find that I don’t want to go to the stacks and get bogged down in a no doubt complicated scholarly-critical controversy. All my other favourites here can be read without *having* to do that kind of trip because of a point of interpretation that affects the whole poem. I am content to leave this one open.

Or rather, to go on feeling, in the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary, that he’s wondering now how things turned out for *her*.

## V

His also well-known “**Madam, withouten many words**” isn’t in the language of a pseudo-moral sense of erotic entitlement.

Madam, withouten many words,  
Once I am sure ye will or no,  
And if ye will, then leave your bords,  
And use your wit and show it so.

And with a beck ye shall me call,  
And if one one that burneth always  
Ye have any pity at all,  
Answer him fair with yea or nay.

If it be yea I shall be fain,  
If it be nay, friends as before;  
Ye shall another man obtain  
And I mine own and yours no more.

“Bordes” means jests. The non-romanticizing, non-“problematizing” tone is what we can still hear three centuries later in the conversation of the literal lords and figurative ladies of Harriet Wilson’s glorious Regency memoirs.

Wyatt’s great, plangent “My Lute Awake” has too much of the gusto of craft to be a straightforward *carpe diem* expression of unhappiness. It is *song*, and rich in its self-dramatization and accumulating indictments of her, as well as deft in finding the rhymes for the word “done” at the end of each stanza.

## VI

The juxtaposition with those two poems serves to bring out further the looser rhythms and syntactical structuring of “They Flee from Me,” the first two lines all a subordinate clause after the first four words, lines four to six largely a subordinate clause (“That now are wild,” etc), and the second stanza almost all a subordinate clause.

It was better once *when*—and the rest is all the “when,” with an odd blurring of the straightforward narrative line by “In thin array, after a pleasant guise,” which in fact doesn’t attach itself immediately to a noun or pronoun.

## VII

And I suspect that the poem is less odd metrically than it appears when read with present-day speech patterns.

There is indeed a reversed foot with “stalking,” the rest of line two becoming trochaic (tumty, rather than ti-tum), but it’s still a five-stress ten-syllable line. And I don’t think that line three has only four stresses (“seen”/ “gentle”/ “tame”/ “meek”). I think it’s more natural to feel the “I” as stressed too (the rhythm still trochaic).

And I’m reasonably sure that in line four, it’s not “That *now* are *wild* and do *not* remember,” but “That now are wild [pause] *and* do not remember.”

And in line five (continuing the trochaic pattern), the “That” is slightly stressed and “time” rather than “some” is stressed (“*That* some *time* they *put* themselves in *danger*”).

The word “special” in the second stanza is obviously trisyllabic, rhyming with “fall” and “small.”

## VIII

In the first line of the third stanza, I think that “I lay broad waking” is said with an emphasis (denying that it was a dream) in which “I” and “lay” and “broad” and “waking” are all more or less equally stressed, lengthening that part of the line in the mind’s ear, so that you aren’t conscious of the “missing” syllable.

I would also think that “kindly” is not our “kin-dly” but “kind-ly,” which would make it, when voiced, trisyllabic.

Of course there are still five lines in the poem that lack (in iambic-pentameter terms) a syllable. But that’s just fine, it *works*. These are speech patterns.

## IX

In the late 1950s, a second-generation New Critic called Arnold Stein published what I recall as a twenty-plus-page “interpretation” of “They Flee from Me” in the *Sewanee Review*, in which he argued, among other things, that the plural in the first stanza shouldn’t be taken literally. I praised it deadpan, in the graduate-student quarterly that I was co-editing, as a devastating satire that gave the coup-de-grace to the New Exegeticism.

With characteristic humility, the distinguished scholar Samuel H. Monk stopped me in the corridor to thank me for having put him straight about the article. He had, he said, assumed that it was intended seriously. (No, he wasn’t being ironical, even though his best-known article was on the irony of Swift.)

You can see why people were starting to get fed up in those days with Nouveau Crit.

## **An Irish Airman Foresees His Death**

I know that I shall meet my fate  
Somewhere among the clouds above;  
Those that I fight I do not hate,  
Those that I guard I do not love;  
My country is Kiltartan Cross,  
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,  
No likely end could bring them loss  
Or leave them happier than before.  
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,  
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,  
A lonely impulse of delight  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;  
I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
A waste of breath the years behind  
In balance with this life, this death.

W.B. Yeats (1865-1939)

### **I**

I almost left this out as being too obvious—and besides, I talk a bit about it elsewhere. But I've had it by heart for years, and though the "I," the speaker of the poem, is fictive and other for me in a way that the "I's" of most of the other poems here aren't, it's still a moving and very satisfying poem.

It's highly artificial in its rhetoric—the speaker dead, the progression hyper-orderly, and all that syntactical parallelism— but it compresses real feelings and attitudes with respect to the deaths of young men in war before they have had a chance to live the full lives to which we feel them entitled; their "normal" life span.

And, in its particular compressions, it is not being some of the other ways of coping poetically with that subject, under the broader rubric of epitaphs.

## II

Such poems are essentially comfortings, ways of seeing losses as not mere negatings, mere needless deprivings of the dead of their expected due, and others of the companionship that they hoped for.

Rupert Brooke had written in advance his own Great-War epitaph in that way, “The Soldier,” its central point (“If I should die, think only this of me/ That there’s some corner of a foreign field/ That is forever England”) being a simplification of what Thomas Hardy had done at the time of the Boer War a decade-and-a-half earlier in “Drummer Hodge.”

Hardy’s poem movingly progresses through its three stanzas from the opening casualness of “They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest/ Uncoffined—just as found,” via an evocation of the high dry South African plateau and the Southern constellations above it that would have been so strange to the representative English country *boy* (as young as thirteen or fourteen), to a mystical sense of the unity of that buried lad, that landscape, those constellations.

Brooke’s poem, in contrast, collapses into stuff about a personified “England,” and the “eternal mind,” and the like. But the sentiment of the opening, and of Hardy’s larger vision, still has its emotional truth, as you recognize when seeing on the box those Great War cemeteries of Canadians and others, still maintained in what used to be called Flanders Fields.

So that was, and is, one kind of comforting.

## III

There was also (WWI still) the *dulce et decorum* sense of duty done and public good accomplished, such as in the clever pseudo-classical kitsch of A.E. Housman’s two-quatrain “**Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries**,” about the small army of British regulars who delayed the German advance in 1914.

These, in the day when heaven was falling,  
The hour when earth’s foundations fled,  
Followed their mercenary calling,  
And took their wages and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;  
They stood, and earth's foundations stay  
What God abandoned, these defended,  
And saved the sum of things for pay.

The magniloquent overstatements in the first stanza (“These in the days when heaven was falling,/ The hour when Earth’s foundations fled”) are neatly paralleled in the second (“Their shoulders held the sky suspended./ They stood, and Earth’s foundations stay”.)

And ironical play is made with Kaiser Bill’s dismissal of the soldiers as a contemptible little army of mercenaries. The Old Contemptibles (to give them their own self-designation thereafter) “followed their mercenary calling,/ And took their wages and are dead,” the word “mercenary” being given its full four-syllable weighting to fill out the line.

But when you stop to think about it, what’s he *talking* about with those falling heavens and collapsing foundations?

Well, simply the possibility that the German army that had swept through Belgium, following the Von Schlieffen plan, would have reached Paris and put an end to the conflict with the war-as-game speed that everyone, including young men tired of the tedium and complexities of peace, had expected when it started, and which, in view of the four years of insensate horror that ensued on the near-miss halting of that advance, would have been a blessing for everyone, including the French.

#### IV

The poem is a good example of the patriotic “classical” rhetoric that would induce in F.R. Leavis after the war a hyper-sensitivity to muddled and/or inappropriate figurative language, and to the rhetorical self-beglamourizing of General Othello, and which would lead to the *Scrutiny* movement’s extending downwards into the British school system, where young readers were shown how to read more alertly.

But note—Housman’s rhetoric isn’t objectionable because of internal inconsistencies. It’s objectionable because of its misrepresentation of external realities—its referential falsity. Under different circumstances,



such as the foiling of an H.G. Wellsian plot to lay waste London, Paris, and Rome, it would look better, wouldn't it?

## V

Robert Bridges' was more economically "classical" in the two-line poem, also in 1914, that Yvor Winters praises in *Forms of Discovery*:

Askest thou of these graves? They'll tell thee, O stranger in  
England,  
How we Worcesters lie where we redeem'd the battle.

The classical metre presumably slows your reading down and serves to remind you, if you happen to know them (which I don't), of comparably understated Greek epitaphs, with an implicit sense of shared nobilities across the centuries.

I can't say that the poem seems all that wonderful to me, though.

## VI

But then, neither does Hugh MacDiarmid's "Another Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries" from the early Thirties, which Leavis praised at the time:

It is a God-damned lie to say that these  
Saved, or knew, anything worth any man's pride.  
They were professional murderers and they took  
Their blood money and impious risks and died.  
In spite of all their kind some elements of worth  
With difficulty persist here and there on earth.

It's in the Nortons, I see, or at least in my oldish copy of one of them, and I suppose it's felt to be speaking Important Classroom Truths that the impressionable young need to be inoculated with. But as an enunciation of ICT's about professional soldiers (and sailors and airmen) everywhere, it's a goddam lie itself.

So you have to do some filling in to get it to work right, such as by summoning up media images of the professional British army in 1914, or guessing what aspects of it MacDiarmid himself had in mind.

And was he contrasting the British volunteer army with those of Germany and France, where they had universal military service? Or were those the armies of *capitalist* countries, and would MacDiarmid, a hardcore Stalinist to the end, have condemned the Red Army fighting the Whites to save the Revolution in 1918-1921, or the Government forces trying to keep Franco from Madrid in 1937? You can bet your life he wouldn't.

Anti-martial rhetoric can be curiously selective. It all depends, sometimes, on whose peace is being defended.

## VII

If you were to judge the two poems "in themselves," meaning allowing some degree of referentiality (1914 and all that), but not pushing the point, and viewed them as, well, mimetic expressions of "natural" or "understandable" modes of feeling on the part of two individuals coming from vastly different and adversarial cultures, how would they fare?

Personally, I'd opt for the elegance of Housman's epitaph, which at least has an operatic swell and flare to it, maybe with background music by Elgar.

Orwell said somewhere or other that some pleasures are like a taste for cheap sweets. He wasn't being snobbish. There's obviously a zone of the mind where you can, if you wish, say, "I *know* this is defective, but I just can't bring myself to put it out with the trash."

One of the numerous pleasures for me of Philip Larkin's *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* was coming early in it upon Henry Newbolt's gamey but effective Imperialist ballad-narrative "He Fell Among Thieves," which I pretty well had by heart as an adolescent, just as a few years later I would have by heart most of Auden's "Now from my window-sill I watch the night."

Newbolt's poem had obviously lodged itself in Larkin's own youthful consciousness, utterly different though his own verse would be.

Does what I'm confessing to here take us towards a welter of "camp" subjectivities, where you like this and I like that and never the twain can meet? No, or at least it needn't. The term "like" is broad and loose,

and one can still talk with others about what's there *in* this poem or that, rather than moving out into autobiography. And either or both of you may notice things that you hadn't noticed before.

Leavis famously suggested that a useful paradigm for critical exchanges is, "This is so, isn't it?" "Yes, but..." (though I suppose the reply could also be, "Certainly not. Furthermore..."). Would I want to *fight*, in argument, for Housman's epitaph over MacDiarmid's, I mean really wanting to change someone else's mind?

Certainly not. They're both defective poems. But I'd be bothered if someone in a discussion group so disliked the politics of Housman's poem that they simply couldn't *see* its formal features at all, if only to better understand (from their perspective) how it worked its evil magic.

## VIII

I don't much care for Orwell's category of the good-bad poem, though.

It invites the it's-so-deliciously-bad-it's-good ploy, as well as suggesting the existence of consensuses. It seems to me better to speak of things being good/quite good/not too bad of their kind, with the implication that they can be bad or unspeakably *awful* of their kind (as can this or that kind itself)—and be honest with yourself about things that you *know* are lousy but don't or can't wholly stay away from.

Some of the elements of goodness that I've talked about extend much further down the chain of "respectability"(or its absence) than people might think.

Snotty lists of the Ten Worst Movies are likely to contain egregious errors of inclusion. And *King Kong* doesn't automatically make it onto lists of the hundred *best* ones.

## IX

Oddly enough, Kipling's thirty-two multi-perspectival "Epitaphs of the War 1914-18" in a variety of short forms aren't jingoistic, and include "If any question why we died,/ Tell them, because our fathers lied." (He had lost his own son in the war.)

But the effect, at least on me, of all those imagined first-person speakers (a coward, a nurse, a refined man, and so forth), and the insistently figurative language, is to make more remote and literary the actual flesh-and-blood figures who died in that collective butchery.

This is not a space into which an Edward Thomas, a Wilfred Owen, a Henri Gaudier-Brzeska could enter and be spoken of meaningfully.

And Kipling achieves his own unique brand of repulsiveness in:

**R.A.F. (Aged Eighteen)**

Laughing through clouds, his milk-teeth still unshed,  
Cities and men he smote from overhead.  
His death delivered, he returned to play  
Childlike, with childish things now put away.

**X**

Lastly, at least for my purposes here, there was that mind-set—increasingly difficult for someone like myself to comprehend now when watching totally *insane* skiing on the box, or total maniacs deliberately climbing overhanging rockfaces with nothing but the grips of their finger tips and their sneaker-clad toes to keep them from the sucking void—that Thomas Osbert Mordaunt had voiced in his eighteenth-century quatrain,

Sound, sound the clarion, fill the fife!  
To all the sensual world proclaim,  
One crowded hour of glorious life  
Is worth an age without a name.

Julian Grenfell, a professional soldier who died of wounds in 1917 at the age of twenty-seven, and who—Eton and Balliol, “scholar, artist, poet, sportsman”—was described at the time as “one of the most complete Englishmen ever to come from Oxford” (though he sounds to me more like a more or less noble Nietzschean savage), wrote a famous forty-six-line poem, “Into Battle,” developing the proposition that, “life is colour and warmth and light,/ And a striving evermore for these;/ And he is dead who will not fight;/ And who dies fighting has increase.”

Apparently, to judge from Reginald Pound's *The Lost Generation* (1964), he really *meant* it.

It was *dulce et decorum* stuff like this ("sweet and fitting to die for your country") that made writers like Leavis and Céline and Breton, who had experienced up close the insensate horrors of that entrenched and long-drawn-out conflict, direct their energies subsequently against the public rhetoric, including bad "classical" figurative language, that had conduced to the conflict in the first place.

## XI

It was also those poems, well, not the Bridges one, that I myself was reading on my own, browsing in the library of my secondary-school during World War II in England, along with the weekly *Illustrated London News* (provided for the miniscule common-room in the boarding section of the school, with its reassuring battle maps and drawings of ingenious weaponry), and first-person non-fiction about tank battles in North African, and ingenious escapes from German prisoner-of-war camps, and heroic aerial combat, especially in Richard Hillary's memoir *The Last Enemy*.

And you know, I think that irony would have been out of place there. The war was going on, the seniors (three of them I remember as especially admirable) whom you saw performing splendidly in rugby matches or keeping order by their mere vertical presence at morning assembly, went off to it, and others of us, who were given some rudiments of military expertise in the Army and Air Force cadet corps, were presumably going to go off in our turn.

## XII

This was simply how things were, it was the way the world *was* at that point.

And so, yes, the possibility of death, and the actuality of what would now be considered premature deaths, was, in a way, normal, so that you had no inclination to step outside the *melée* and say that this just shouldn't be *happening* (though, come to think of it, my fellow DP from London, John Lynes, who was more politically sophisticated than I was, turned up after one vacation with a scruffy paperback of

savagely anti-war anarchist cartoons that struck me as practically treasonous—fat-pig top-hatted capitalists and all that. I mean, this war wasn't about *money*, surely?

Dachau and the torture chambers of the Gestapo were across the Channel. The Japanese with their long bayonets and their beheading swords were in China and on the Pacific islands. This *was* the world, and there had been wars before (as in *Henry V*), and there would no doubt be wars again.

Not that you particularly thought that you were going to die. There were hero-survivors a-plenty in the movies to identify with, and you certainly weren't one of the supporting players who were casually picked off along the way.

But if you *did* die, well, the self-sacrificing deaths of heroes in the final reel were not noble *because* they were deaths, they were fitting because they manifestly resulted from doing the only decent thing that could be done at that point, at least if you wanted to go on living with yourself morally.

Cowardice wasn't an acceptable moral option.

And at that time, before teens and tweens and thongs and DVD's, before Carnaby Street and *Sergeant Pepper*, before *everything*, it wasn't as if an English male adolescent, at least a quasi-intellectual one, was looking ahead to a particularly rich and interesting future of which he would be deprived by some projectile.

But actually I wouldn't have been conscripted until the summer of 1946, and after D-Day it was clear enough that the good guys would have won by then.

### XIII

So I think the kinds of comforting or death-defining that I've talked about were functional.

I myself was reading at the time the poems that I've mentioned, except for those by Bridges and Hardy. And it was moving, at least for a romantic like myself, when at the end of a memorial service in the school hall in 1945, some prefect read out from Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen" the lines that go, "They shall grow not old, as we that

are left grow old:/ Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn./  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning/ We will remember  
them.”

Which, I now see, were a vulgarization of Housman’s irritating but  
deft “To an Athlete Dying Young,” and were the only remotely decent  
lines in an otherwise unspeakably awful poem.

#### XIV

It was at the same school, in the same years, that I read “An Irish  
Airman Foresees His Death.” And if I have gone on at the length I  
have about those other poems, it is by way of indicating what “An  
Irish Airman” isn’t, and what Yeats didn’t do.

The airman, the young Royal Flying Corps officer, being Irish, is a  
volunteer. He has not been conscripted. He has not been seduced by  
the ghastly patriotic rhetoric that D.H. Lawrence savaged in *Kangaroo*  
and elsewhere. He doesn’t hate the Germans (the Hun). He has not  
been put under any sensed or self-imposed moral obligation to enlist  
(those were the days when Englishwomen handed out white feathers to  
healthy-looking men in civilian clothes who could be presumed to be  
“slackers,” a.k.a. draft-dodgers).

The airman is *Irish*, not English, he doesn’t love “England” (as did  
Brooke and Edward Thomas), and his own emotional commitment is  
to the rural Ireland evoked by the fictive name “Kiltartan.”

#### XV

So why, then?

Well, I guess it does come down to something like Mordaunt’s “one  
crowded hour of glorious life,” an experience so dramatic, as the  
combats of those young knights of the air indeed were in those days  
and would be again during the Battle of Britain, that you simply  
couldn’t bear to miss. it, any more than these days, evidently, there are  
individuals who cannot contemplate a mountain without wanting to  
climb it.

But the speech is all stripped down, spare, analytical, an affair of  
weighing and balancing, pairing and contrasting, summarizing, with

not a single “personal” detail, and only one adjective modifying a noun (“lonely”), and verbs driving the action forward.

So that it is the imagined voicing of someone who is choosing freely and existentially the path he wishes to take and the end that he is prepared to accept. It’s an end a good deal less messy than what was happening below in the trenches and on No Man’s Land, as described by poets like Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg. But it’s also much more likely to occur, the mortality rate for new pilots facing the accumulated skills of veteran opponents being appalling.

And the progression is masterly, with not a word wasted, and the evocative lift-off in lines 11-12 is magnificent, and the rhyming skillful, with not a trace of the stylistic fumbblings or blurrings that you get in a number of the other poems in Yeats’s fascinating transitional volume *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) in which it appeared.

## XVI

It too was a comfort poem, a *self*-comforting poem (comforting too, for Yeats’ patron and friend Augusta Gregory), and I have only just realized something about it.

“In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” (Robert being Lady Gregory’s airman son), which Winters came to consider “a very bad poem,” and which seems to me a very *good* poem, is dated 1918, and in it Yeats is doing what none of the other writers of those war poems did, namely talking about the richness of the life that had been cut short—“Soldier, scholar, horseman he/ As ‘twere all life’s epitome./ What made us dream that he could comb grey hair?”

But the poem, a dramatic monologue, albeit in the great eight-line stanza that Yeats had taken from the 17th century poet Abraham Cowley and made his own, makes no reference to the war or the nature of the death, and simply stops as “a thought/ Of that late death took all my heart for speech.”

It is in “An Irish Airman” that he provides an essentializing answer about the necessity of that death and its entailed loss of precisely those heroic and aristocratic qualities that he himself most admired. And it’s his finest celebration of those qualities in their martial and more than merely personal or regional form.



I realize that I have been importing a lot of extra knowledge into the poem. But it came easily (that was “my” period), and it doesn’t change the direction of the poem in any way but simply helps firm up what’s there.

When the remarkable-sounding Leo Geary, the son of the American artist Carol Lind Geary, died in a paragliding accident in 1991 at the age of thirty-two, stanzas from “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” slightly adapted, were read at the open-air funeral service in New Zealand.

## A Bit about Meter

### I

Stephen Hawking, reports the philosopher and mathematician James Franklin, “remarked that each equation in a book halves its sales.” The same can probably be said these days about references to metrics. But sometimes *something* has to be said in order to lessen misunderstandings.

### II

The number of syllables in the lines of “my” French poems are fixed. To retrieve the “missing” syllables—missing to the Anglophone eye—read as if with a slight Italian or Provençal accent, which is to say, sounding very slightly the unaccented letter “e” at the end of a word when the following word begins with a consonant.

If you want to be *really* right, also hear, faintly, the unaccented “e’s” at the *ends* of lines in the poems by Baudelaire, Gautier, and Rimbaud. If you then look at the line endings and note the unaccented “e’s”, whether coming after a consonant or another vowel (as in “ie”), you will see consistent patterns of alternation, patterns which may subliminally create a song-like effect—thirteen syllables alternating with twelve, or whatever the case may be.

### III

The often-repeated assertion that French verse is “syllabic” in contrast to accentual-syllabic English verse (which is to say, what we have in most of the poems in English here) can be very misleading if it implies some kind of monotone or wholly random patterns of stresses.

Of course there are stresses in French words, normally at the ends of words. When the Italian-born Yves Montand sings French lyrics and sounds the terminal “e’s, there’s a clear pattern at times, familiar to English ears, of a recurring number of stresses as well as of syllables per line. Recently I came upon Joachim du Bellay’s mid-fifteenth-century “La Vieille Courtisane.” When you sound the terminal “e,” including its appearance in words like “vie,” you’re to all intents and purposes reading over three-hundred iambic pentameter couplets.

The poems here by Villon and Gautier are close to (though not at every point identical with) how similar poems would go in English with occasional reversed feet.

With the one by Rimbaud, you are into the peculiar music of the alexandrine, the twelve-syllable line of classic French verse. The number of syllables per line is scrupulously observed, but they can fall into various groupings, with attendant stresses, such as one *two*, or one two *three*, or one two three *four*, which can be combined in a variety of permutations—“One *two* / one two three *four* // one two *three* / one two *three*”—and so on .

To put it at its simplest: In English you have a determinate number of stresses and a variable number of syllables. In French you have a fixed number of syllables and a variable number of stresses. Nothing, at least below the 12-syllable lines, mandates that a French line can never have the same pattern of stresses as an English one with the same number of syllables. In the Renaissance, octosyllabic lines in particular seem to require a fair degree of regularity in order to keep moving along at a steady pace.

Modern English syllabics, unless very skillfully done, such as by J.V. Cunningham in the sequence “To What Strangers What Welcome,” can either seem like normal lines gone wrong or else so much effort has gone into their *not* being iambic that the contents are secondary.

#### IV

But when we speak of stresses in verse, whether French or English, we’re not speaking of thumps and raised voices. We’re referring to the *relative* emphasis of a syllable in relation to the one or two others that it is linked in so-called feet. A more technical term for “stress” is “ictus,” but personally I’m more used to “stress.” “Ictus” sounds faintly unwholesome.

The words “upon,” “recalled,” and “shortchanged,” different though they look and sound, all have their stresses on the second syllable. All, to be technical, are iambs. A line consisting of “light” words like the first would move faster than one made up of ones like the third.

With the alexandrine, the possibility of monotony is further diminished by the muted “e’s”.

The verse of Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* sounds at times a bit like how Gautier's might have sounded to someone ignorant of the principles I've described (which Pound himself, of course, was *not*).

But in fact the last line of Gautier's "Sur Les Lagunes" ("La ville de Canaletto") doesn't go, "La *veel* de Canaletto," but "La *veeleh* de Canahlettoh," moving lightly and rapidly.

## V

Gerard Manley Hopkins says somewhere of his own (to English ears) unfamiliar-sounding experiments that one should simply take ear and read for the sense and the right emphases will reveal themselves.

Which is to say, not worry about whether "rules" are being obeyed or not. He was a bit over-optimistic about his own verse, but it's good advice for the French poems here, and in fact they read marvelously.

I talk about Hopkins in "Reading Hopkins" and the follow-up, on my website at <http://www.jottings.ca/john/hopkins2.html>

## VI

You don't necessarily have to know anything about metrics in order to read a poem well. I have seen—and heard—students who knew nothing about them, and perhaps not much about poetry, pick up a poem, not necessarily a "light" one, which they'd never seen before and read it impeccably.

This may partly have been because the speech manner in a poem, even without any density of biographical or autobiographical details, can evoke a certain kind of personality, perhaps coming from a certain kind of culture, that someone else—not everyone, of course—can enter into.

But becoming more conscious of formal features is partly a corrective to bad habits, whether believing that a poem must proceed with mechanical regularity, or assuming that what's in it is going to be so odd and unpredictable that you'd better get the damn thing out of the way as fast as you can.

Learning to read by the so-called whole-language method, without a consciousness that words are made up of syllables, no doubt contributes to the latter approach.

## VII

You can also at times discover more about what is being *said* in a poem. I have talked about that in connection with Hopkins, so will give another example here.

Hardy's much anthologized 1915 poem "**In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'**" goes as follows:

1

Only a man harrowing clods  
In a slow silent walk  
With an old horse that stumbles and nods  
Half asleep as they stalk.

2

Only thin smoke without flame  
From the heaps of couch-grass;  
Yet this will go onward the same  
Though Dynasties pass.

3

Yonder a maid and her wight  
Come whispering by;  
War's annals will cloud into night  
Ere their story die.

The title alludes to an Old Testament passage, "Thou art my battle axe and weapons of war: for thee will I break in pieces the nations, and with thee will I destroy kingdoms." (*Jeremiah* 51:20).

"Couch" is pronounced "cooch," or at least it was in Wiltshire seventy years ago. The grass had long, white, and I think shallow roots and when torn up by the harrow would be gathered into heaps at the ends of furrows and burned.

## VIII

Until I decided to get acquainted with metrics myself (they had always seemed so inorganic), I assumed that there was an interesting rocking rhythm in the first stanza, miming the movement of the ploughman and his horse.

Which is to say, I “heard” the stresses as falling on the first syllable of “Only,” then “man,” then the first syllable of “harrowing,” then “clods,” this pattern being followed in the third line too. And my ear stressed “In,” the first syllable of “silent,” and “walk” in the second line, plus “Half,” “sleep,” and “stalk” in the fourth.

So that he was saying, it’s just a man, just a horse, nothing dramatic there.

Which was OK by me, particularly given the rocking effect in “*With an old horse // that stumbles and nods.*” Mimesis, you might say.

## IX

*Except* that when you look at the second and third stanzas, you will see that there are (basically) three stresses in the longer lines and two in the shorter.

Whereas “my” reading of the first stanza gives four and three stresses, respectively, for the longer and shorter lines.

So you would either have to assume that the author allowed himself to vary things in that way (not a self-evidently false proposition) or that I was misreading.

Since I didn’t come across Hardy doing that kind of varying in other poems, I had to reconfigure and reduce the emphases by one.

And when I did, the stresses shifted to the harrowing (the whole action), the slowness, and the fact the horse was old.

*Only a man harrowing clods  
In a slow silent walk  
With an old horse that stumbles and nods,  
Half asleep as they stalk.*

## X

And yet, and yet, the weighting of “slow” and the first syllable of “silent” are still very close together, as are “Half” and “sleep,” so it isn’t as if my misreading, as I take it to be, simply goes away altogether.

And when you come to the final two lines of the poem and you read how “War’s annals [Latinate] will cloud into night/ Ere their story [Germanic] die,” it is natural to feel that there is a contrast here between the large-scale memorialized doings of nations and the “stories” of the kind of plain people who were around before nations came into being and will still be around when they—the big nation states—have vanished (as in Yeats’ “Egypt and Greece farewell, and farewell Rome” in “Meru”).

And yet I think (for you do have to choose and can’t simply thump on both words, or at least that’s not how Hardy works elsewhere) that the emphasis has to fall on “their.”

So metrics, at least when a poem’s good, really *are* about meaning and not just something mysterious called rhythm. And also about feeling, for in fact the feelings, the attitudes, with which one speaks the first stanza in each of the two versions are subtly but distinctly different.

But enough of that.

## XI

You can also perceive more when you get away from a poem as a *visual* experience, a shape or sequence of shapes that can be criss-crossed with the eye the way pictures can.

The layouts of poems, with the slightly increased pausings required when the eye has to move from the end of a line back to the beginning of the next one, a pause increased when one moves from the end of a stanza to the beginning of the next, are partly scorings for how the poem should sound when voiced.

It took me awhile (“The life so short, the craft so long to learn,” as Chaucer put it) to realize that that’s also true of those “staggered” layouts in Pound’s *Cantos* and elsewhere, where a sentence slants down the page as a series of steps. Apparently Mallarmé could read

aloud beautifully his “Un coup de dès” (“A Throw of the Dice”), which must be typographically the most difficult prose poem *ever*.

## XII

Lastly, a bit of blindness.

For years I misread Wallace Stevens’ “Sunday Morning.” I failed to grasp that the morning in question was, as I now understand it to be, Easter morning. Accordingly, at the outset of the third stanza (“Jove in the clouds had his inhuman birth”), I took the third foot, “had his”, to be a reversed foot or trochee (cf. “His fear of heights had its origins in childhood”). And I wondered why Jove had suddenly been brought in and given such attention. The poem seemed, and remained, broken-backed.

Eventually, when I realized that the contrast here was with the birth of Jesus, the stress slipped back to where it belonged.

But, to adapt Billie Holiday (well, Harry Woods, if one wants to be pedantic),

Ooh, ooh, ooh,  
What a little trochee can do...



## Among the Monuments

### I

For several weeks during the winter of 1989–90 I slept badly. They were not dark nights of the soul. It was the body that was uncomfortable.

Some of the cold of the fearsome North American winter that year had reached down to the Mexican village where my wife and I were staying for my third sabbatical. The house was unheated, the bed less than perfectly comfortable—not a nest, but a darkling plain on which I shifted around in search of ease.

One night, during a waking spell, I tried recalling a poem that I particularly admired, George Herbert's seventeenth-century "Church Monuments."

### II

I was not seeking to allay dreads or overcome self-disgust. I had done that twenty years before, alone in the high thin air of Mexico City, in the interminable small hours of a hotel room with light seeping in greyly from the airshaft, when I said over to myself like mantras several of the poems of J.V. Cunningham—"Coffee" ("When I awoke with cold/ And looked for you, my dear," etc); and others.

Those were the voicings of someone who had *been* there and come back. It was comforting to be able to say, "Dark thoughts are my companions. I have dined/ With lewdness and with crudeness..." and the rest of the six-line poem, culminating in "In the cat-house of the disheveled dead," and to know that you could acknowledge such things without being destroyed by them.

But I was not seeking moral comfort from Herbert's poem, or at least not in a simple way. Nor was I after the kind of at-home-ness that comes for me with the superb confidence, the steady bravura progression, of a poem like "Sailing to Byzantium," which has been imprinted on my memory for years.

"Church Monuments" did not offer the comfort that comes each time you firmly close off one stanza and embark on the next one—"An

aged man is but a paltry thing,” “O sages standing in God’s holy fire,” “Once out of nature I shall never take”—and feel the *differentness*, the firm identity, of each new stanza, almost as if you were progressing through a linked series of mini-poems.

When I had, after a fashion, memorized “Church Monuments” a couple of years previously, I had been struck by how, despite its four-square look on the page, its four six-line stanzas didn’t in fact work in that way.

It was a poem that you couldn’t rest in. Once you had started on it (“Now that my soul repairs to her devotions”), you simply had to keep going, without the conventional pauses at the ends of stanzas. And it kept threatening to slip away, so that you had, as it were, to create or maintain it as you went along.

### III

There are other major poems like that, of course.

In some, such as Hardy’s “The Haunter” (“He does not think that I haunt here nightly”) or Villon’s “Frères humains qui après nous vivez,” the rhymes are so interlinked and the lines so similar in structure that you have trouble recalling which line goes in which stanza, and at times a line can simply drop out of mind.

In others, such as Valéry’s “Le Cimetière Marin,” there are simply so many highly individuated stanzas that it is hard to recall which one goes where, and whole stanzas can disconcertingly vanish.

And part of the satisfaction of being able to say over to yourself unfalteringly an elaborate poem is that you *have* been able to remember it.

You’ve negotiated a series of difficulties—the way in which, say, the rhymes *come* in a ballade like Villon’s, without any forcing of sense and syntax, or how, in complex stanzas like those of Donne’s “The Sun Rising” (“Busy old fool, unruly sun”) or Yeats’ “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” not only do rhymes keep coming but the shortening and expanding of the lines also goes on without any forcing.

## IV

It's always nice to be able to hold in your memory an elaborate sequence of moves.

It's nice to be able to solve one of those puzzles in which different-sized rectangles of wood in a frame have to be shifted in an intricate sequence so that the largest of them can travel from one corner to the opposite one.

It reassures you that the mind can reach ahead and "shape" things.

## V

But it wasn't simply that, either, that I was after on those winter nights when I was trying to make my way through "Church Monuments."

I did want a kind of comfort. But in a way, the comfort came precisely in the experiencing of the difficulty and the fact that you couldn't entirely surmount that difficulty. I wanted a certain kind of poetic openness, a reminder or re-reminders of the possibility of utterance that doesn't become tamed, that resists being collapsed into its "ideas" or the "personality" of the author, or its "symbols," or other abstractions whereby the professional academic, the "expert" in such matters, is able to take over and fit the poem into a larger structure, demonstrating its essential *similarity* to various other poems.

I also didn't want the kind of detached reading in which you fasten on this detail or that and, as if focusing on a face or a hand in a portrait, "examine" it, discourse about it to yourself (in part as if discoursing to others), so that your *own* discourse dominates at that point. If I had come to value this particular poem, it was because it had already offered a resistance to that kind of thing.

## VI

Here is the text of the poem.

While that my soul repairs to her devotion,  
Here I entomb my flesh, that it betimes  
May take acquaintance of this heap of dust  
To which the blast of death's incessant motion,

Fed with the exhalation of our crimes,  
Drives all at last. Therefore I gladly trust

My body to this school, that it may learn  
To spell his elements, and find his birth  
Written in dusty heraldry and lines;  
Which dissolution sure doth best discern,  
Comparing dust with dust, and earth with earth.  
These laugh at jet, and marble put for signs

To sever the good fellowship of dust,  
And spoil the meeting. What shall point out them,  
When they shall bow, and kneel, and fall down flat  
To kiss those heaps, which now they have in trust?  
Dear flesh, while I do pray, learn here thy stem  
And true descent; that when thou shalt grow fat

And wanton in thy cravings, thou mayst know,  
That flesh is but the glass, which holds the dust  
That measures all our time; which also shall  
Be crumbled into dust. Mark, here below,  
How tame these ashes are, how free from lust,  
That thou mayst fit thyself against thy fall.

## VII

It was not a poem that I myself had noticed at Oxford in 1949 when I wrote one of my weekly tutorial papers on Herbert, a poet who excited me as Donne and Marvell did.

I recently came upon the large-print Victorian edition of Herbert's poems that I bought for a shilling or two in that first undergraduate year, along with volumes of Crashaw and Waller. There are a lot of my pencillings in that volume: wiggly lines alongside stanzas, connecting arrows, underlinings, cryptic penciled comments. I had evidently been glimpsing a lot, or feeling that I glimpsed it.

But "my" Herbert, the Herbert who moved me most, was the Herbert of "Virtue" ("Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright") and lines like, "I read and sigh and wish I were a tree/ For sure some bird would trust/ His household to me, and I would be just." "Church Monuments" remained unmarked.

My eye must simply have slid across it—several times, probably—identifying it as a straightforward Christian-clerical poem, rather than the poem of a sensitive person, almost a “modern” person, who happened to be earning his living as a cleric at a time when there was very little else for such persons to do.

## VIII

What brought me back to “Church Monuments” was the high praise accorded it by Yvor Winters in *Forms of Discovery*, which I reviewed in 1968. In the earlier *The Function of Criticism*, his naming of it as one of the greatest poems in the language had sounded like a characteristic example of his eccentricity, along with his preference for T. Sturge Moore over Yeats. Now, I was more impressed.

But even though, when read in the context of all the other poems praised in *Forms*, “Church Monuments” did indeed seem rich and sonorous, something to put beside Fulke Greville’s “Down in the depth of mine iniquity” or Edward Taylor’s “View all ye eyes above,” it still didn’t truly come alive for me until, in the lovely Nova Scotia summer of 1987, two years before we headed down to Mexico, I tried committing it to memory.

That summer—and it *was* lovely, particularly out alone by one of the lakes near our city, without a house in sight—I was also trying to memorize Valéry’s “Le Cimitière Marin” and Rimbaud’s “Larme” (the latter also highly praised by Winters), as well as more accessible poems like Hardy’s “The Haunter” and Edwin Arlington Robinson’s “Eros Turannos.” It was an exciting experience.

I had memorized poems before—“Sailing to Byzantium” and “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” “The Sun Rising,” “Virtue,” and Marvell’s “The Garden” among them—but I had never before had the sensation, as I did with Valéry’s great poem, and as I was to have a year later with a few of Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*, that in a sense I was *composing* this or that poem as I lay in bed with a medley of finished and partly finished stanzas, unattached lines, and odd phrases, and tried to summon up from memory, and from my sense of how a stanza was going, or a run of stanzas, what *ought* to be there.

It was all rather like those fragmentary, scribbled-over earlier drafts of “Sailing to Byzantium” that the editorial activities of Yeats scholars have made available to us.

## IX

Formerly, I had more or less taken over poems that I particularly liked as if they were dramatic monologues, so that I could in a sense “be” Auden sitting in September of 1939 in one of those dives on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street, or Yeats in his new-made home in the ancient tower, its living room warmed by a peat fire, and the Irish west all around, with its “cold Clare rock, and Galway, rock, and thorn,” and colourful denizens (“And where was it/ He rode a horse without a bit?”), and the mind summoning up other figures—Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Sir Philip Sidney.

I was “being” Cunningham, too, in the small-hours greyness of my Mexico City hotel room when I said over to myself—aloud? or in the echo chamber of my head?—

When I awoke with cold  
And looked for you, my dear  
And the dusk inward rolled,  
Not light nor dark, but drear,

Unabsolute, unshaped,  
That no glass could oppose,  
I fled, not to escape  
Myself, but to transpose,

and on to the end of that moving five-stanza poem.

But now, in the summer of 1987, I was conscious of the *strangeness* of several major poems, and the extraordinary difficulty of progressing through a series of stanzas or linked lines in which at each point something slightly *new* was happening or being added, but all the time with perfect formal appropriateness.

## X

I had “Church Monuments” by heart in the sense that I knew all the words and didn’t have to get up and refresh my memory from the

printed page. But I found the poem continually getting away from me with respect to something fundamental, namely the stanzaic structuring.

I knew—I could picture its shape on the page—that the poem consisted of four stanzas, and that the basic rhyme scheme was *abcabc*. And when I distanced myself from time to time and skimmed the visual field, I could provide the rhyme words of each stanza.

But each time that I began at the beginning and said the poem through to the end, I found that the structure was dissolving on me, so that quite soon I could not tell which stanza I was in or, at times, what word was rhyming with which.

And on each occasion the poem felt much larger, longer, and fuller, more charged with things going on, than its spectral pictured shape suggested.

## XI

I was always a very poor chess player. But the experience that I am talking about was a bit like that of a game of chess, in which the initial clarity of the board, and the simplicity of the rules, soon gives way to a complex mental dynamics of space and time, in which the mind struggles to hold in a series of configurations what has already happened and what may or will happen, so that the “present,” the space where you “are” at any moment, is a dance of interactions between “past” and “future.”

There was nothing anxiety-making about all this. It wasn't like what happens—for me at least—when you tell yourself that *this* time you're going to read through the first section of Mallarmé's “L'Après-Midi d'un Faune,” or the opening Time-Present, Time-Past lines of Eliot's *Burnt Norton*, with start-to-finish understanding, only to find yourself dissolving into a welter of confusion like that of your teary ten-year-old schoolboy self trying to work a set of algebra problems for his homework.

On the contrary, the experience was a heartening one.

It's always heartening when poetic form—I am using the term broadly—does what it is supposed to do, so that the merely visual field fades

and you become involved in a progression of changes and additions, of continuous enrichments, from which you can't step back, as if before a picture, and have the poem all there at once in your head.

It is what happens, for me at least, in the progression from stanza to stanza in poems like Hardy's "The Haunter," with its repeated rhyme words ("know," "go," "do", "to"), or Baudelaire's twenty-one-stanza "Les Petites Vieilles" ("The Little Old Women"), with its brilliant shiftings of poetic registers, or—well, the reader can think of his or her own favourite examples.

Works of that kind don't go stale; don't become "known" and, like a squeezed orange, reduced to their "ideas," or autobiographical content, or anything else, including their form. Genuine vitality, the kind that exists in and through its ordering, is always heartening.

## XII

I am now going to do something risky and offer a start-to-finish account of "Church Monuments," based largely on what seems to me to go on as I say the poem over to myself.

I have had the printed page at hand while writing it, and have referred to the text from time to time. But I have tried as far as possible to avoid a quasi-pictorial skimming in which your mind's eye, while you're thinking about an early part of the poem, leaps ahead to other places in the poem and back again, so that you're reading that early part in the light of what comes later, with related assumptions about what "must" be there in the early lines.

The risk of a point-by-point account is, of course, that it makes static what is dynamic, fluid, "organic."

A good deal of criticism has been a reaction against the would-be totalizing accounts that began with Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren and that felt, for all their intricacy and ingenuity, Brooks' especially, so untrue to the actual experience of reading rather than analyzing a poem.

Too many privacies were being invaded, too many cherished wildernesses and sun-warmed fields of high grass and wild flowers



confidently trampled through, surveyed, marked out for further development.

But since the effects that I am concerned with are sequential ones, I don't know how to proceed except sequentially.

### XIII

The text of the "Church Monuments" that I have used is the one in Yvor Winters and Kenneth Fields' major canon-challenging anthology *Quest for Reality* (1969), a text identical, apart from minor modernizations of spelling, with that in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F.R. Hutchinson (1941).

It was Winters who first brought the poem into such visibility as it now possesses and who wrote in *Forms of Discovery* (1967),

It is always rash to give extremely high praise, and most critics avoid doing so; yet in the matter of importance of theme and mastery of execution, this poem and Jonson's *To Heaven* appear to me the most impressive short poems of the English Renaissance... [W]hen I turn for an example in English of what the short poem should be at its best, these are the first two poems that come to mind.

His own analysis of certain aspects of the poem's syntax in relation to lines and stanzas is characteristically sensitive, especially when he talks about how we pause naturally even at the ends of enjambed lines. But his approach for the most part is fairly narrowly formal, and there is a lot in the poem that he doesn't talk about.

My own account is not significantly indebted to his.

### XIV

Here's the poem again:

While that my soul repairs to her devotion,  
Here I entomb my flesh, that it betimes  
May take acquaintance of this heap of dust  
To which the blast of death's incessant motion,  
Fed with the exhalation of our crimes,

Drives all at last. Therefore I gladly trust

My body to this school, that it may learn  
To spell his elements, and find his birth  
Written in dusty heraldry and lines;  
Which dissolution sure doth best discern,  
Comparing dust with dust, and earth with earth.  
These laugh at jet, and marble put for signs

To sever the good fellowship of dust,  
And spoil the meeting. What shall point out them,  
When they shall bow, and kneel, and fall down flat  
To kiss those heaps, which now they have in trust?  
Dear flesh, while I do pray, learn here thy stem  
And true descent; that when thou shalt grow fat

And wanton in thy cravings, thou mayst know,  
That flesh is but the glass, which holds the dust  
That measures all our time; which also shall  
Be crumbled into dust. Mark, here below,  
How tame these ashes are, how free from lust,  
That thou mayst fit thyself against thy fall.

## XV

The first three lines are a straightforward unit—almost.

While something is going on, we're told, something else is going on, so that something further may go on, a single line being devoted to each of those somethings:

While that my soul repairs to her devotion,  
Here I entomb my flesh, that it betimes  
May take acquaintance of this heap of dust

And what is being talked about is going on “here.” But already things are not moving in quite the expected direction.

If the ostensible key-setting first line leads us to expect a continuing decorum corresponding to the decorum of the soul (a soul energized for us by “repairs to” and the feminizing “her”), the second line swerves away from the high-level activity that all souls—all devout

ones at least—engage in, to what “I” do, a more individuated “I,” an “I” that is curiously separate from both soul and body.

And this “I” is not the conventionally autobiographical “I,” as in Yeats’ “I pace upon the battlements and stare,” in “The Tower,” or Auden’s “I sit in one of the dives/ On Fifty-Second Street” in “September 1, 1939.”

It is, rather, the speaking “I,” the speaking self that is characterizing what is going on with that striking phrase “entomb my flesh” (the stone church cold like a tomb?), and the drama of whose characterizings we are drawn further into with the again unexpected and individuating phrase “this heap of dust,” a phrase whose reference, given the plural title and the singular “*this* heap of *dust*,” is not instantly clear and in fact never becomes so.

This isn’t a sort of “Elegy Written in a Country Church,” with the curfew bell ringing, the cows sauntering home across the meadow, and the rest of it. You can’t simply say, well, by the words “this heap of dust” (irregular, powdery, unstable) he simply means—what? the packed earth of the church floor? the bony remains of bodies buried there?—just as you cannot simply say what various lines in Mallarmé or the Mallarméan Edgar Bowers’ “Dark Earth and Summer,” for example, can be reduced to.

Nor are we being told how the speaker “feels” or “thinks,” as in Auden’s characterization of himself as “uncertain and afraid/As the clever hopes expire/ Of a low dishonest decade,” or Yeats telling us how “I turn away and shut the door, and on the stair/ Wonder how many times I could have proved my worth/ In something that all others understand or share...”.

We have moved rapidly from the familiar general concept of religious meditation to a more specific and unfamiliar something, the body “tak[ing] acquaintance” of “this heap of dust.”

And not only does the third line not rhyme with the first, as you would have expected, but there is a dwindling down in the rhyme words from “devotion” (latinate, trisyllabic, a feminine ending), to the characterless but still lengthened “betimes” (two syllables, but “times” is strongly diphthongy), to the terse colloquial “dust.”

It is a progression that feels more appropriate to blank verse, a feeling reinforced by the soliloquy-like “hereness” of the speaking: a Shakespearian effect, you might say, like the contrast between the “latinate” and the “Germanic” in Macbeth’s “No, this my hand will rather/ The *multitudinous seas incarnadine*,/ *Making* the green one *red*.”

## XVI

So, you wait for a development, a statement, about that getting acquainted; and then—Zap! Pow!

To which the blast of death’s incessant motion,  
Fed with the exhalation of our crimes,  
Drives all at last.

Not only does the development concern the heap of dust rather than the getting acquainted (the soul doing this, the body doing that). The individuation intensifies with the extraordinary phrase “the *blast* of Death’s *incessant motion*” and what follows it.

The major syntactical incompleteness compels us to move on to the fourth line before we have fully assimilated those difficult linked concepts (blast? motion?). And the fifth line, rather than unpacking and clarifying the previous one, complicates it further and magnificently with “*Fed* by the *exhalation* of our *crimes*” (crimes, not sins).

You don’t finally come to rest syntactically until the middle of the next line with “Drives all at last.”

By this time, especially given the conceptual compression of that *blast* of an incessantly moving and impersonal death (not at all the conventional spectre with book and scythe) that is fed by the “exhalation” of our slightly more personified crimes—by this time the rhyme scheme has virtually been lost to the mind’s ear.

The dramatic “motion” (energetic in relation to “dust,” both conceptually and aurally) simply doesn’t relate back tidily to “devotion.” And however many times I say over the poem to myself, “crimes” is so embedded in its context (“fed by the exhalation of our

crimes”) and so different semantically that I have to struggle to summon back the very low-keyed “betimes” that it is echoing.

So that when the poem moves forward again with:

Therefore I gladly trust  
My body to this school, that it may learn  
To spell his elements, and find his birth  
Written in dusty heraldry and lines;  
Which dissolution sure doth best discern,  
Comparing dust with dust, and earth with earth,

the sense of a neat *abcabc* scheme has been lost.

## XVII

Furthermore, the unbalancing with respect to the doings of the soul and those of the body has now extended into the conceptualizing of the poem.

Instead of being enabled to become more at home in the mode of talk in the previous long sentence, we now get an analytical amplification of what the thinking mind can derive from contemplating the place where the speaker (but he doesn't come embodied to the mind's eye) is presumably kneeling for the purpose of his devotion.

With a curious bifurcation whereby these reflectings appear separate from whatever is going on in the devotions.

And if the exposition has become more analytical and the metaphors more grounded (the body “at school” is studying the heraldic devices and inscriptions on the wall monuments and recognizing how it too is bound for death), the diction, apart from that “dissolution,” loses its Latinity, and the rhyme words not only become more ordinary but set up a kind of alternate stanza of their own: “trust—learn—birth—lines—discern—earth.”

It takes a powerful effort not to see “earth” as the closing rhyme of a pair of triplets.

## XVIII

These unbalancings, with their thwartings of the mind's desire for the stability of substantial stanzas, is, as the next stretch of the poem brings out, mimetic.

As soon as you've have settled on "earth" with a sense of having come back to base structurally, the next line—the animated "These laugh at jet and marble, put for signs" contrasting with the sombre "Comparing dust with dust and earth with earth"—comes along to disrupt things. It echoes "lines" and is in fact the true closure, but because of its own vigour ("These *laugh* at jet and marble") works as an opening rather than a closure.

And in fact the next stretch of the poem, the one that deals most fully with the subject announced by the title, is increasingly dramatic.

## XIX

In contrast to the first sentence of the poem, with its major universal concepts of soul, body, death, and crime, and the second, with its processes of scholarship, deciphering, and inference-making, the statement,

These laugh at jet, and marble put for signs  
To sever the good fellowship of dust,  
And spoil the meeting

brings into the poem a common-humanity attitude towards death, time, and the dissolution of bodily and social identity.

The organic dust and earth *laugh* at the shiny black jet and pale marble and their attempt (or the attempt of those who have had the monuments set there) to—to what? to identify one heap of dust, one disintegrated body, as being superior to another, I suppose.

And the two-and-a-half-line sentence, unrhyming and undiluted by any opening clause, moves forward increasingly fast, as if emphasizing the absence of any stopping-point, the impossibility of a holding back.

In contrast to "Comparing dust with dust, and earth with earth," with its balancing and its marked caesura, "These laugh at jet and marble put for signs" advances without pause, and "To sever the good

fellowship of dust,” with its light opening iamb and its two pyrrhics or near-pyrrhics, is the fastest moving line in the poem. The sentence ends in mid-line with the feminine “meeting.”

## XX

In the sentence that follows, also short, there is an almost cartoon-like quality to the image in the sardonic question, so final in its unanswerability:

What shall point out them,  
When they shall bow, and kneel, and fall down flat  
To kiss those heaps, which now they have in trust?

This is the language of a standing-against—the language of the not rich, the not old-family, the not concerned with the perpetuation of one’s noble-looking bodily appearance.

Moreover, if the image of all those busts bowing and kneeling and falling flat on their faces—the topplings all going on more or less at the same time—is cartoon-like, it is a magisterial cartooning, as in a sermon, and its weightiness is increased formally in yet another unbalancing, so that the effect of these two-and-a-half lines is very different from that of the previous two-and-a-half.

If the movement of “and spoil the meeting” is fast and falling, the last four syllables of “What shall point out them” are stepped progressively in a rising pattern, the last three words of “and fall down flat” have an almost equal weighting, and the final word of the sentence (“trust”) is also stressed.

## XXI

And the ostensible four-squareness of those stanzas on the page is becoming even more subverted.

This time the mind, in its search for recurrences and resting-places, has created a five-line pseudo-stanza: “signs—dust—them—flat—trust.”

These laugh at jet, and marble put for signs  
To sever the good fellowship of dust,  
And spoil the meeting. What shall point out them,

When they shall bow, and kneel, and fall down flat  
To kiss those heaps, which now they have in trust?

But it is an unstable structure. It feels *odd*, as if parts had been falling away without your quite realizing how.

And the sentence beginning “These laugh at jet and marble,” coming at the center of the poem, has overridden the division between the first two and the last two stanzas. While seeming to be simply developing the idea of “comparing dust with dust and earth with earth,” it has also reintroduced the word “dust” as a rhyme word, so that there is another swerve away from a tidy progression, a laying of one stanzaic block upon another.

Moreover, the “*good* fellowship of dust” contrasts with the mere “heap of dust” in the first stanza, and the glad trust in that stanza contrasts with the stiff having-in-trust of the monuments.

It is all very different from the majestic opening of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 65—“Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea/ But sad mortality o’ersways their power”—with its clear relationships and its implicit validation of the idea of imperial dominion.

## XXII

In the sentence that follows, with yet another change of tone signaled by the intimacy and tenderness of its opening “Dear flesh”, you (well, *I*) simply give up the attempt to divide things into formal units while trying to follow the thought:

Dear flesh, while I do pray, learn here thy stem  
And true descent; that when thou shalt grow fat  
And wanton in thy cravings, thou may’st know,  
That flesh is but the glass, which holds the dust  
That measures all our time; which also shall  
Be crumbled into dust.

There are now no conventional rhymings at all to hang on to, only echoings and repetition (“them...flat...dust...trust...dust... trust”), and the sentence sweeps you forward, with its succession of brief parallel clauses, to that final “dust.”



But while the sentence, with its return to flesh and prayer and lesson-drawing, feels at first as if it is going to be a recapitulation like that in the third stanza of Herbert's own lovely and graceful "Virtue" ("Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses"), there is in fact nothing tidily summatory about it.

The "dear flesh," warm and dear in comparison to the dust and marble, has a kind of natural vitality now, so that its cravings are not simply reprehensible, let alone criminal. It is not simply something to be entombed, nor is it quite the same, quite as specific, shaped, and reproducible in jet and marble, as the body.

It is something that is common to everyone, including those labouring church-goers whom the monuments disdain—sons and daughters of that earth from which all, as descendants of Adam, are *truly* descended. And if it is natural to laugh and enjoy good fellowship, it is also, in a sense, natural for the flesh to grow fat and wanton in its craving for it.

Moreover, given the talk about descent, and the movement from "kiss" to "Dear flesh," and thence to "stem," it is not, it seems to me, mere exegetical ingenuity to sense, in a poem of so many interconnectings, a sexual presence lurking in the references to flesh that grows fat and wanton in its cravings, and our common descent from the fallen couple in the garden.

### XXIII

In the second part of the sentence there is a thrusting forward that makes even more dramatic the imagery—a slightly elusive imagery—of its admonition to the self.

You expect the sentence, and the lesson, to end with "that measures all our time," the tripartite progression of "that flesh is *but* the glass, which *holds* the dust that *measures* all our time" paralleling the progression of "when they shall bow and kneel and fall down flat."

There would be a conventional reductiveness there, the lively striving body actually (when looked at correctly) only a contained dust.

But the sentence keeps going, and there is an extraordinary drama to the last part of it, given the hovering induced by "which also shall" (is

it the glass, the dust, or “all our time” which is going to be talked about?) and the energy of “crumbled.”

The admonition to know “that flesh is *but* the glass” suggests something small and limited. But it is a glass

which holds the dust  
That measures all our time; which also shall  
Be crumbled into dust.

And there is something magnificent and tragic about all this that counterpoints the ostensible mid-sentence collapse (the surge forward broken) into that recurring “dust.”

We move quite beyond the confines of the church walls here, into an inexorable but vast futurity. Viewed thus, the flesh, the body, and the whole perceiving mind are far more charged with *gravitas* than those grave monuments and their arrested moments of time.

#### XXIV

In comparison with all that has preceded it, the closing sentence of the poem—

Mark, here below,  
How tame these ashes are, how free from lust,  
That thou mayst fit thyself against thy fall

feels a bit perfunctory.

The “ashes” are introduced abruptly and not developed. It requires no particular effort of mind to agree that the ashes of the dead are without lust. And the fact that you cease to feel lust—or anything else—when you’re dead has no obvious moral bearing on how you (for of course it’s a whole self and not a mere body that’s involved) conduct yourself with the prospect of your own eventual death in mind.

It is as if Herbert has essentially already said all that he needed to say, so that the attempt to finish on a more conventionally moralistic note without unbalancing the poem has resulted in his having to move too elliptically.

Moreover, the word “fall,” with the uneasy tension in it between the biblical associations of the word and the emblematic pictoriality that it derives from the earlier image of the falling monuments, draws us *away* from the lying-down reality of dying.

However, maybe there’s a fleshing-out if “thy” gets an increased emphasis—*thy* fall, thy own fall.

## XXV

But these are logical—“merely” logical—reservations.

From a formal, but not, I think, merely formal, point of view, it is interesting how underplayed the ending of the poem is, both in the brevity of the sentence and the way in which “below” (given the “dust” that has preceded it in the line) dwindles away as a rhyme word, and how, even allowing for changes in pronunciation, the final “fall” does not immediately connect up with “shall” as a clinching rhyme.

It is one last instance of the avoidance of conventional symmetries, the refusal to rest on a single taken-for-granted ground, including the ground of form, that has gone on throughout this extraordinary poem.

## XXVI

However, I mustn’t stop there, on my own QED. closure.

As I said earlier, there are risks in what I have been trying to do. And one of them is the Unspoiled Beach effect.

Have I, in celebrating the openness of “Church Monuments” in such detail, been behaving like a travel writer whose praise of an undiscovered paradise leads to a loss of the seclusion for which he’s praising it?

Have I, in effect, been imposing an imperial reading of my own, imperial in the Brooks-and-Warren fashion, on the living experience of others, and making the poem, for them, a tamer one?

I would prefer to think not.

## XXVII

I've been talking about committing poems to memory, and about saying over this particular one, "Church Monuments," from memory.

And just as committing a poem to memory is, for most of us, a far more complex and interior matter than making a photocopy of it, so saying over a poem from memory, unless you have fly-paper-retentiveness, is a good deal different from pressing a button and making a computer print-out.

There's likely to be a large gap between what you hear as you voice a poem silently to yourself, and what you hear when you listen to a recording that you've made of it.

## XXVIII

Inevitably, when it comes to saying over, we all hear poems differently.

Winters' recording of "Church Monuments," while impeccable with respect to the metrics of the poem, and in places very moving, is not how I myself hear the poem. His was not the voice that sounded in my head as I lay in the winter darkness of Mexico and lived with the poem behind closed eyes in the strange everywhere-and-nowhere space that is to be found there.

There is no one right voice, nor have we any way of knowing how poets themselves, in pre-recording days, heard their poems.

And even when they've made recordings themselves, there will probably be gaps between the voices on the tapes or disks and those inside their head. Who knows what "Prufrock" sounded like to its twenty-three-year-old author, or what that author would have made of the gloomy later recordings of it by the man many years his senior whom he had become?

## XXIX

Moreover, when you *give* yourself to a poem in a start-to-finish saying-over, a lot of other things simply fall away, which is why you

can cherish the stabilizing, the living altogether in the *now* of the saying-over, that you attain with poems that you really care about.

Particularly if you are committing yourself to what you hope will be a halfway decent recording of it.

You cannot dwell simultaneously in the poem and its commentaries.

And the kind of commenting that I've attempted—listening to myself listening to the poem, as it were—has involved disjoining aspects of the poem that in fact coexist.

In places, too, I may have falsified, or described only clumsily, what I “saw” and felt. I am still not sure whether the sexual aspect that I hinted at would in fact be there for the voice that has been speaking in the poem up to that point.

So I don't really expect that a reader for whom “Church Monuments” is living discourse will find his or her mind “invaded” by what I have said.

### XXX

However, I'm not trying now to return us to a welter of subjectivities in which nothing is really seriously discussable at all, since there is nowhere in which those subjectivities can meet and be to some extent grounded.

I have done my best to point to things that are there in the poem, there in formal terms or that can be related back to formal features of the poem. And if the poem has grown on me as it has, this is partly because of a particular aspect of its general thereness.

It is not a poem that we need to go “behind” in order to understand it—a poem that is a species of façade behind which we find, if we care to explore, the more “real” realities of George Herbert's life and thought, or seventeenth-century Anglican thinking more generally.

Nor can it be subsumed into a lower-common-denominator genre, the Herbert poem, the Metaphysical poem, and so forth.

In these respects it takes its place alongside poems like Wyatt's “They flee from me,” and Nashe's “Adieu, farewell earth's bliss,” and

Villon's "Frères humains qui après nous vivez," and Hardy's "The Haunting," and others of which, *mutatis mutandis*, the same kind of thing can be said.

And its thereness, and its richness, is a function of how the words follow each other in time, in constantly shifting, even if at times very quietly and subtly, metrical, syntactical, and stanzaic relationships that are unique in Herbert's poetic *oeuvre*.

### XXXI

"Church Monuments" came alive for me as itself, not as a piece of the George Herbert story, about which I know almost nothing, or a typical seventeenth-century devotional poem; but simply as a poem like "The Haunter," or "They flee from me," or "Frères humains," or any of those other marvelous poems that don't require you to be a specialist in order to appropriate them with full commitment.

And when, two years later, in that Mexican winter of 1989-90, I went exploring in it again, pencil in hand and index cards in front of me, it was partly because I was trying, away from libraries and bookstores, to do a critical reading in which I opened myself to works that I cared about, without knowing in advance what I would be saying about them.

I was also resisting the literary-theoretical assumption that since "we" all know by now, or think we do, how we are meant to read this or that work, what's called for now is a demonstration that in fact "we" are mistaken in that belief.

### XXXII

I said earlier that "Church Monuments" isn't Gray's "Elegy."

It isn't that steady, sombre, meditative progression, each stanza a unit, a defining, in which the things defined—the evening scene, the mortality of the rich and powerful (those "animated busts" recalling Herbert's perhaps), the talents lost because of the accidents of birth—all in a sense external to the speaker, albeit with a strong emotional projection into them.

It doesn't invite us out into reflections about that social world, and about the unfairness of life in it, responded to with a kind of melancholy stoicism, or at least a sense of fatality, with no likelihood of social change, but with a strong affirmation of the "invisible" poor as centers of individual being and potentials, and a celebrating of the sensitive (but powerless and ineffectual) educated observer (proto-Romantic, you might say).

### XXXIII

Nor is it a precursor to that better known and better reputed poem dealing with death and dissolution, Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirits Seal," with its neat two-stanza juxtaposition—then/now—and the interior neatness of its eight two-line units: I/She/She/It

A slumber did my spirits seal.  
I had no human fears.  
She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force.  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course  
With rocks and stones and trees.

The poem is graceful, and the feeling of calm security in the first stanza recalls a little the calm evoked in Herbert's "Virtue" ("Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright"). The penultimate line, with the kinaesthetic "Rolled round" and the magisterial "Earth's diurnal course," is the making of the poem.

But it is a peculiarly *visual* poem, the general points in the two stanzas being taken in almost immediately.

And if the poem has been the subject of interminable discussion and elaborate commentaries, it is because it is so little *there* formally that you're reduced—or, if you like it, stimulated—to an explication of key terms that are themselves insufficiently defined by their interconnectings.

The iambic lines, without a single reversed foot or spondee in them, when said over, simply slide by, in contrast to those of such quatrains as:

I wander through each chartered street  
Near where the chartered Thames does flow;  
On every human face I meet  
Marks of weariness, marks of woe,

Or,

Ye living lamps, by whose dear light  
The nightingale does sit so late,  
And studying all the summer night  
His matchless son does meditate.

Or, more simply,

Western wind, when wilt thou blow?  
The small rain down can rain.  
Christ, that my love were in my arms,  
And I in my bed again.

#### XXXIV

And when, in the precipitation of memory, you try to slow Wordsworth's lines down and *weight* them, you're driven back to the autobiographical "I," the uncertainly referential "she," the nature of that slumber, and that sealing, and those ultra-wide-angle "human fears."

Which gets you into some odd problems with respect to the authority of the voice.

You not only have to project yourself into, and more or less invent, what it's like to be in a figurative "slumber"—or to have your "spirit," a compartment of the self, be in one—where you have no human fears (as distinct from what other kinds?).

You also have to take on trust that this did actually, real-world, happen. The speaking "I" says that it did, therefore it *did*. I mean, that's the implication. But for how long, you may not unreasonably wonder, since it affects the nature and significance of that "slumber"?



I mean, what *was* the relationship here? Is “she” a child or young adolescent, charming with the seemingly permanent charm of youth? Or was it a love relationship, even a marital one? And if so, are we getting, perhaps, a slightly self-centred and sentimentalizing love-blindness, an insufficient awareness of the Other, a milder version of what Hardy so poignantly gives us in “The Going”?

The terms “motion” and “force,” since we have both of them, presumably require some kind of glossing in their interaction. So does the distinction between “rocks” and “stones.”

### XXXV

No doubt all these impertinent questions have long since been answered by Wordsworth specialists. But that is partly my point. The information has to be imported into the poem, because it isn’t discernibly there on the page. And I question whether, when you’re voicing the poem with full commitment, or trying to, it can be effectively *part* of the experiencing during that reading.

You’re also liable to be getting into a circularity when you have to find some of the meaning of one poem in another poem (I’m aware that there were the “Lucy” poems) or a prose text (a letter by Wordsworth, or whatever it was)?

So we are into, romantically, the Wordsworth Story, a sort of composite of the poems, and their commentators, and what Wordsworth “himself” in *The Prelude* tells us about his self.

### XXXVI

*Church Monuments* isn’t like that. Nor are all the other poems in Winters’ and Fields’ great anthology, *Quest for Reality*. And their interactions with one another are complementary, not explanatory, a constellation of presents, with at times strong differences, at others surprising resemblances.

“Church Monuments” belongs in there with powerful, difficult, later-twentieth-century poems about mortality like Edgar Bowers’ “Dark Earth and Summer,” Thom Gunn’s “In Santa Maria del Popolo,” and Scott Momaday’s “Before an Old Painting of the Crucifixion.”

And when you look at such poems, and at a number of the others that I've mentioned and which Winters celebrated, you realize how crude is the conventional dichotomy of "classical" and "romantic," and how simplistic, too, can be the idea of what makes a poem "modern."

1990–2003

**Note.**

I have now (2003) obtained Brian Kemp's *Church Monuments* (1985), a brief, authoritative, illustrated guide to the subject. It leaves no room for doubt that the monuments in question would have been, as I had always assumed, inside a church or cathedral. And his statement that "In the early seventeenth century the trend towards lifelike realism was taken further with the first appearance of seated and standing effigies..." suggests that Herbert was dealing with what would at that time have been modern phenomena—perhaps nouveaux riches ones.

According to Professor Armstrong: "In churches of this time, the deceased may be buried under the stones on the floor, behind plaques on the wall (both true in Salisbury Cathedral) and in monuments inside the church (George Herbert's parents at St. Nicholas Church, Montgomery, Wales). George Herbert himself was buried under the altar at St. Andrew's, Bemerton, Wiltshire."

# Vision and Analogy

## I

In Yvor Winters' fine short story, "The Brink of Darkness" (1932), the narrator recalls a solitary and deranging winter out among snow-covered Western hills, during which

I felt that I saw farther and farther into the events about me, that I perceived a new region of significance, even of sensation, extending a short distance behind that of which I had always been aware, suggesting the existence of far more than was even now perceptible.

Near the end,

It was as if there were darkness evenly underlying the brightness of the air, underlying everything, as if I might slip suddenly into it at any instant, and as if I held myself where I was by an act of the will from moment to moment.

The story feels like an impeccable transcription of actual events.

During most of the 1920s, Winters himself had been deeply Romantic, hungry to penetrate to and seize the essence of things. And in this he was like earlier American writers like Hawthorne and Melville, and like his contemporary and, for awhile, friend, Hart Crane, all of them driven by a heuristic passion like Hölderlin's earlier, and Rimbaud's, and Mallarmé's

## II

In her 1996 Afterword to her *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, the American photographer Nan Goldin recalls how:

AIDS altered our lives in every respect. The notion of self-destruction as glamorous became self-indulgent when people around us started dying; that romantic vision of the self-destructive artist, having to suffer or induce pain in order to work, that sense that creativity has to come out of euphoric crisis, or out of extreme excess, changed. With the advent of death in our lives came a real

will to survive, and help each other survive, to show up for each other.

She herself had to go into detox, but came out finding that she could still make gorgeous photos.

### III

On the board in front of me are two lists, copied I forget from where. One is the names of twenty-seven American writers who were alcoholics, the other of sixteen who weren't.

The former includes a lot of big-bang names—Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, O'Neill among them—but I see that the latter begins with Pound, Eliot, Frost, and Stevens.

Sometimes it's 10% inspiration, 70% perspiration, 20% desperation.

There's a difference, though, between needing liquor to rev you up, and keep your juices flowing, and help you to unwind afterwards, and at times, perhaps, achieve a self-punishing oblivion, and the Sixties-type belief that there's a superior Reality out there that hallucinogens will give you unmediated access to.

Coleridge ("Mr. Poppy") achieved the *Mariner*, *Xanadu*, *Christabel*, *Frost at Midnight*, the *Lime-Tree Bower*, and *Dejection* (too much of *that*).

Verlaine ("Monsieur Wormwood") wrote during his fifty-two years the over nine hundred well-made poems in a large variety of forms that are there in the thin-paper *Oeuvres poétiques complètes* in the Pléiade series.

Not that anyone in his right mind would choose to live Verlaine's appalling life.

### IV

The 1880's and 1890's were a heyday of absinthe, industrial-strength tobacco, and other mood-altering substances, as well as of Symbolism.

In *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901), his sub-pornographic yellow-back reworking of Huysman's *A Rebours*, Jean Lorrain demystified the

prestigiously “unmentionable” mind-blowing experiences that were hinted at in *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, particularly in that book of mystico-erotic power that cynical Lord Henry puts into the willing hands of young Dorian.

They boiled down, among Lorrain’s “Decadents”, to the “love that dare not speak its name” (particularly with silken-skinned North African youths), plus opium, hash, and ether.

Lorrain, who died prematurely and horribly from the effects of ether drinking, evidently knew what he was talking about. The circles in which he moved included Robert de Montesquiou, the model for Proust’s Baron Charlus. I don’t recall there being drugs in Proust.

## V

André Breton (no doubt with Baudelaire’s wisdom about what Lautréamont called “the blossoms of drear annihilation bred by opium” in mind) worked out ways of heightening consciousness that didn’t require drugs and didn’t impose an intolerable burden on the isolated individual. Surrealism (his own greatest creative achievement) was a cross-fertilization of multifarious symbol-systems, with room in it for *l’Amour*.

It was a complex monitoring and steering. Mere revolt (of the Tzara-Dada variety) could become arid. Rimbaud’s prescription of “a long, gigantic, and rational *derangement of all the senses*” (emphases sic) could destroy you (like Artaud) or render you nugatory if unrelated to creative social action.

You didn’t have to *become* Rimbaud.

For F.R. Leavis (*mutatis mutandis*, an English Breton in his role as *chef-d’école*) the way would lie through the heightened, tubercular, flame-like consciousness of D.H. Lawrence; and the poetry of Blake. Plus the language of Shakespeare.

“I’m not a man who likes books for their own sakes” (Breton). “You won’t find *me* talking about ‘literary values’” (Leavis—Breton’s senior by a year).

Think of the dreadfulness of a twentieth-century England without Lawrence! Or, for that matter, of ‘English’ without Leavis.

## VI

Winters' sense of the perils of Romanticism was heightened in the later 1920s by his observation of the downward-spiralling career of Hart Crane.

His essay "The Significance of *The Bridge*, by Hart Crane; or What Are We to Think of Professor X" (in *In Defense of Reason*) is one of the most important twentieth-century critical texts.

The forty-six pages in *Forms of Discovery* on "The Post-Symbolist Methods" are his own greatest contribution to the question of how you can have the intensity and individuation sought by Romanticism, without the crash-and-burn.

Thom Gunn said of the book, "I know of no other prose work from which one can learn so much about poetry, how it actually works, what makes it valuable."

## VII

Winters praised, deservedly, the writings of his wife Janet Lewis.

The oils and watercolours of Carol Hoorn Fraser in the 1970s and 1980s, done without benefit of stimulants, and accessible on [jottings.ca](http://jottings.ca) via the homepage, demonstrate what can occur when intensity of vision—an intensification always of real-world elements—goes along with technical mastery, a strong sense of expressive form, and an ongoing concern with more than merely "art" values.

It's an art that accords with Baudelaire's statement that the allegorical, when rightly managed, is "a deeply spiritual art form, which...is really one of the primitive and most natural forms of poetry."

Analogical thinking is one of the most natural forms of thought.

## VIII

At the linguistic heart of the workings of the Imagination (Romantic-style) was metaphor.

By a mysterious process of the mind, a new trans-rational nexus was simultaneously perceived and articulated. Something, in terms of the

new theorizing, *was* something else and not merely *like* it, in contrast to similes, in which the nature of the two parts, and their ontological separateness, was immediately perceptible.

The great I AM modulated into the great IT IS. The procedure would have a long life among symbol-hunting critics, who were liable to inform you, with lectern-gripping earnestness, that the woodspurge in Rossetti's poem of that name "is" the miracle of the Trinity, or the bread and beer in Rimbaud's "Romance" "are" the eucharist.

Some people's antennae must simply *quiver* whenever they see the word "three."

This kind of allegorizing is only possible when you're viewing a poem from the outside as an enclosure from which you can pick and choose elements as you wish, creating your own supposedly organic wholes of recombined opposites.

It's a process entirely at odds with the experience of recording a poem. You cannot simultaneously commit yourself to the "given" feeling that is emerging as word follows word and also be off in a much more abstract and formless Elsewhere.

For a bit more about the epistemological problems involved, see "Powers of Style," XL–XLII

## IX

The kind of person who thinks you're injecting significance into a poem by detecting buried religious symbolism is getting things the wrong way round. Religious symbols, Christian ones at least, acquired their significance in the first place because they arose from "ordinary" real-world, experiences.

Bread and wine, those primary nurturing presences, fruits of the earth and of patient human labours, were shared on a famous occasion at a feast in the shadow of impending doom.

Virginia Woolf gives us, marvelously, the feast (just an "ordinary" family dinner during a summer vacation) in *To the Lighthouse*. Nan Goldin catches elemental energies in her water's-edge, *sur-l'herbe*, "Picnic on the Esplanade, Boston."

## X

Muddling up “concrete” situations in good poems by introducing cliché religious symbols does neither zone of being any good.

A *reductio ad absurdum* of religiosticism was Stanley Fish’s self-congratulatory “experiment” with the blackboard “poem” that I comment on in my website in “Referentiality.” His students’ baroque allegorizings of the list of names of scholars left up there from a previous class presumably derived from his own teaching practices—though no doubt, on the part of some of the brighter participants, done tongue-in-cheek, the ironist ironized. Fish doesn’t appear to have a sense of humour.

A sense of humour, like a feeling for metaphors, involves perceiving analogies—behavioural analogies.

## XI

In general, poets are no more anxious to hide their symbolizing than are the devisers of ads in which SUVs glide effortlessly through lush unpeopled valleys.

When Blake writes,

O Rose, thou art sick!  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night,  
In the howling storm,  
  
Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy,”

you may not know for sure what is going on in the transaction between rose and worm, but you *do* know, after the third line, that this isn’t a poem about gardening.



## XII

Metaphors, as Paul de Man knew in his quarrel with the East Coast New Critical mandarins, are still essentially comparisons, a subset in the general field of analogical thinking.

Metaphors and metonymies precede similes and perform some of their functions. When one dawn-of-humanity hunter points derisively at another after the group kill and makes a yipping noise like a jackal, he isn't saying that his fellow "is" a jackal, or drawing attention to the shape of his head. He's implying that the latter hung back while others took the risks and made the kill, and now hopes to get some of the meat.

If you probe someone's remark that a colleague has a chip on his shoulder, you come up with a comparison with that boyhood ritual in the rural American past when a kid would put a chip of wood on his shoulder and dare another one to knock it off and precipitate a brawl. Which would be different, in its implication of immaturity, from saying that someone was too quick to throw down the gauntlet.

Behind Lady Macbeth's exhortation to "screw your courage to the sticking-place" lies the cranking up of a crossbow. And when Macduff cries out, "What! all my pretty chickens and their dam/ At one fell swoop," he has seen in his mind's eye a destruction as swift and deadly as the plunge of the falcon on its prey.

Idiomatic sayings like "There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip," and "A cat may look at a king" were ways of coping analogically with situations that were too complex for the speaker to handle analytically. Collectively they were, and to some extent still are, so-called folk-wisdom.

Personally I find "literary" formulations ("To be or not to be," and so on) coming to my mind fairly often in real-life situations.

As they evidently did for T.S. Eliot during his troubled *Waste Land* years.

## XIII

If metaphors and other figures of speech can be made to seem linguistically anomalous and in need of explanation, it is by dint of

positing so-called rational and literal speech as the norm, rather than seeing it for what it is, a late evolutionary growth, whether in the individual or in a society.

Figurative language is the oldest form of speech, and the most enduring. Here is a Welsh miner on tape from forty or fifty years ago:

The curse of underground is the dust. Dust is the giant-killer, but it doesn't strike all at once but he likes his time. And he do takes his time, and he stealthily walks into your human system; into your lungs... He is the real enemy, so minute in its form, and yet so strong in its ravaging powers.

He didn't have to study Shakespeare in order to learn *that*. Shakespeare studied *him*, or his ancestors.

Or at least there had been a complex process wherein the English of the King James Bible and *The Pilgrim's Progress*, itself partly deriving from the idioms and rhythms of English "common" speech, remained an expressive presence in the lives of some of the working people.

The mystification of analogical speech by philosophers is like what would happen if someone with no sense of bodily rhythms were puzzled by the activity called dancing and had to postulate a mysterious faculty to explain it, since obviously it was a most unnatural and inefficient mode of locomotion.

Logan Pearsall Smith's *English Idioms* is still very relevant.

#### XIV

You can "see" our primitive ancestors back in the mists or forests of time defining themselves and their behaviours and characteristics in terms of the physical.

Someone's angry and you laugh and say, or grunt, or make whatever signifying gesture gives you "storm."

A kid is scared and another mimes the movements of a jackal, the movements and signings of animals (their own observable signifying of fear, anger, deference, and so forth) being simpler and more *definite*, like their physical forms, than human ones. More, you might say, "symbolic."

A young hunter is habitually brave and he becomes (is named) Lion. A nurturing generous-spirited girl becomes Spring (the liquid kind).

Yeats asked for his baby daughter, “May she *become* a flourishing hidden tree.” André Breton named his baby daughter “Aube” (Dawn)

## XV

Of course figurative language can *create* mysteries.

There’s no problem, for hearers familiar with the physical referents, the rapid succession of comparisons in Macbeth’s great soliloquy upon hearing of his wife’s death, when “brief candle” is followed by “walking shadow,” which is followed by “poor player,” which is followed in its turn by “a tale told by an idiot.”

Out, out, brief candle!  
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more; it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

You can see the analogy-making or -finding process at work—the instantaneous sense of an extinguished candle, just the candle, no fingers

—and then the somewhat fuller “scene” of light (candle?) and a moving shadow (without mention of the implied wall).

—and then the sense of movement in the shadow generating the fuller and more detailed image (figure against background) of the on-stage actor, a bad one, with hammy gestures.

Which leads to the still more individuated image (via the *words* of the actor) of *an* idiot (the peripatetic village kind) angrily and intently, no doubt with flashing eyes, and desperately working mouth, and gesturing hands, trying to describe something in speech that’s without meaning, at least to the auditor.

It’s almost like a series of potential haiku, isn’t it—candle, shadow, actor, idiot? And none of the allusions is in any way exhausted, or used up, in the sense now you’ve got all that there is to be got in it, like

squeezing the juice from an orange. Candles, shadows, actors, idiots go on being complex themselves.

## XVI

Trouble comes when the sense of the physical has been lost and someone says, “Let’s try and *dig into* our *viewpoints* and see if we can’t *fuse* them,” and you’re trying to sense something coherently physical and can’t (a *literal* “viewpoint,” as on a hill, being the point from which you view a scene).

Or when analogies are so personal and ad hoc that you don’t have time, as you speak your way through the poem, to have the point of the comparison emerge.

As happens in Hart Crane’s “Melville’s Tomb,” the title an obvious allusion to Mallarmé’s “Tomb” poems for Baudelaire, Poe, and Verlaine. (“Often beneath the wave, wide from this ledge/The dice of drowned men’s bones he saw bequeath/ An embassy,”” etc.).

Or when, as in Wallace Stevens’ “Valley Candle,” a self-consistent scene is being evoked and yet it is *strange*.

My candle burned alone in an immense valley  
Beams of the huge night converged upon it  
Until the wind blew  
Then beams of the huge night  
Converged upon its image  
Until the wind blew.

## XVII

You can indeed be in an immense valley and light a candle, and it can seem as if the dark’s coming into the light rather than the light going out into the dark, and the wind can blow out the candle, and there can be an after-image.

But did it *happen* that way (it was *his*) candle? Or are we into a different kind of space, a space of the mind, and if so, what is going on?

It's mysterious, that *immense* unpeopled valley, no other lights anywhere, and the candle itself (like the jar in Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar") feels close-up *big* in the mind's eyes—as big in scale, almost, as the spectrally sensed valley (known by daylight presumably) and the dark of the extending and maybe starless, moonless night.

So I suppose we're into some kind of allegory about the workings of the imagination, the *human* imagination, the *creative* imagination, even perhaps the Fichtean/Coleridgean one (though I'd prefer not to think so)—the recreating non-literally (in memory? in words?) of something, some perception, that was itself a transformation of "merely" physical and over-familiar elements (a candle is a candle is a candle, I'll take half a dozen, please).

And it's beautiful and mysterious and dreamlike, and *brief*—a sort of expanded and intricate *haiku*

But it *is* still analogical, unless you want to say, well, he's a Poet, so it *did* happen that way, particularly if you surrender to the power of the poem's *definiteness*, its verb-driven physical robustness ("burned," "converged," "blew"), and that's how things *are* with the workings of the mind, since he *says* that's how they are, and he must have *seen* it, and it must have been there for him to see.

## XVIII

We're deep into Symbolist territory here. For what made a good many poems Symbolist was not that they were strings of separate symbols like Hippy necklaces, but that a complex evocation of the physical was going on in order to evoke a state of mind, of perception, of *being* that couldn't be spelled out literally without losing its being.

As happens here in Stevens' poem, where I *hope* that students aren't being asked, "And what does the *night* symbolize, class? And what does the *wind* symbolize?"

And you have to hang on for the Symbolist ride and see what kinds of invocations are going on and what the *nature* of the difficulties are, if any. (Personally I don't understand "Valley Candle," but it spoke clearly enough to Carol for her to include it in the 1977 catalogue of her ten-year retrospective. Stevens was her favourite poet.)

Here are three examples of Symbolist elusiveness.

## XIX

Mallarmé's "Le Pitre Châtié" (The Punished Clown) opens with "Yeux, lacs avec ma simple ivresse de renaître"—dictionary, "Eyes, lakes, with my simple drunkenness/frenzy/enthusiasm to be reborn."

And you don't know where the hell you are, in the absence of any syntactical connection between eyes and lakes. In fact there's a positive *thwarting* of a connection by that "avec," as if something had already been said about them.

Yeux, lacs avec ma simple ivresse de renaître  
Autre que l'histrion qui du geste évoquais  
Comme plume la suie ignoble des quinquets,  
J'ai troué dans le mur de toile une fenêtre.

However, an earlier draft begins (aha!) "Pour tes yeux—pour nager dans ces lacs" ("For your eyes—to swim in those lakes"), and we're off into an allegorical account of his being like a clown who has quit the smoky circus booth to go swimming in a clear cold pool and dry himself in the sun, not realizing that the abandoned costume and washed-off make-up were inseparably part of his genius.

Pour ses yeux,—pour nager dans ces lacs, dont les quais  
Sont plantés de beaux cils qu'un matin bleu pénètre,  
J'ai, Muse,—moi, ton pitre,—enjambé la fenêtre  
Et fui notre baraque où fument tes quinquets.

For her eyes—to swim in those lakes whose banks  
Are planted with lovely lashes which a blue morning pierces,  
I, Muse—I, your clown—have leaped through the window  
And fled our booth where your lamps are smoking.

So what had gone on was that Mallarmé, in his revision, had been removing connections and creating a new kind of fragmented and explosive poetic energy, with things half glimpsed and more intense.

Later, "Hilare or de cymbale" ("Hilarious cymbal gold"), with its fusion of mood, colour, sound, and tactility, gives us the impact of the sun on his naked body.

## XX

It is a poem of *difficult* compressions, particularly the bit in the second quatrain about “disowning/repudiating the bad/ Hamlet! as if in the water I was creating/ A thousand sepulchers to disappear there as a virgin.”

De ma jambe et des bras limpide nageur traître,  
A bonds multipliés, reniant le mauvais  
Hamlet! C’est comme si dans l’onde j’innovais  
Mille sépulchres pour y vierge disparaître.”)

But the poem works because the physical is still there, heightened and intensified, not blurred and blended.

We can *feel* the energy of the swimmer escaping emotionally from a Hamlet-like indecisiveness, *thrusting* his arms into the water as if digging his way into a space where he can escape into a new purity and die away from his earlier self (with hints, perhaps, of a ruthlessness towards an Ophelia-like woman).

And it’s not as if the earlier draft were merely tidy and cerebral, the commenting mind dealing logically, French-fashion, with images drawn from a familiar physical world of lakes, clowns, tents, and so forth.

It too is strongly physical in its evocation of water, and sun, and the newly naked body.

And tents and clowns and their costumes and make-up aren’t in fact all that everyday.

And there is a driving energy to the affirmation of his *need* as creator for the artifice and dirt (the smoking lamps) and egotism that he had felt he could dispense with in his self-transcending worship of a “pure” woman.

## XXI

Next, Rimbaud’s remarkable poem “Larme” (glossed by Claire McAllister in Angel Flores’ anthology as meaning colloquially a drop to drink, which makes much better sense here than the primary meaning of teardrop).

Loin des oiseaux, des troupeaux, des villageoises,  
Je buvais, accroupi dans quelque bruyère  
Entourée de tendres bois de noisetiers,  
Par un brouillard d'après-midi tiède et vert.

Que pouvais-je boire dans cette jeune Oise,  
Ormeaux sans voix, gazon sans fleurs, ciel couvert.  
Que tirais-je à la gourde de colocase?  
Quelque liqueur d'or, fade et qui fait suer.

Tel, j'eusse été mauvaise enseigne d'auberge.  
Puis l'orage changea le ciel, jusqu'au soir.  
Ce furent des pays noirs, des lacs, des perches,  
Des colonnades sous la nuit bleu, des gares.

L'eau des bois se perdait sur des sales vierges.  
Le vent, du ciel, jetait des glaçons aux mares...  
Or! Tel qu'un pêcheur d'or ou de coquillages,  
Dire que je n'ai eu souci de boire!

He's there crouching (accroupi) in some heather, or on  
"some" (quelque) heath, among young hazelnut bushes or trees, in a  
warm afternoon mist.

But where? He's "Loin des oiseaux, des troupeaux, des villageoises".  
But is it "far from birds, flocks/herds, village girls" in general? or "Far  
from *the* birds, *the* herds/flocks, *the* village girls," meaning ones that  
he's seen already?

And those birds are a bit odd. Village girls are site-specific, but there  
can be birds anywhere, so why shouldn't they be here too? Unless he  
means farm birds or the birds you get over ploughed land.

Then we have a stanza about drinking that I won't even attempt to  
gloss, but which contains the magnificent line, "Ormeaux sans voix,  
gazon sans fleurs, ciel couvert" ("Voiceless elms, flowerless grass,  
overcast sky")

And then we have a marvellous stanza of rapid jumps:

Tel, j'eusse été mauvaise enseigne d'auberge.  
Puis l'orage changea le ciel jusqu'au soir.  
Ce furent des pays nuits, des lacs, des perches,



Des colonnades dans la nuit bleue, des gares.

He'd have made a bad inn sign (the way he looked while drinking?). Then the storm changes the sky (how?) until evening. And then we have the mind moving abruptly (via the darkness of the storm clouds?) out into the spaces of the third and fourth lines, with the dramatic contrast between the long evocative phrase about the colonnades and the terse "des gares."

## XXII

But *what* spaces?

For me, it was a partly industrialized landscape (as in England's so-called Black Country in the Midlands), which is to say, not merely pastoral but with a mix of lakes, and odd poles sticking up, maybe on little rickety jetties, maybe for mooring, and then we're deeper into the industrial or urban part, with almost Chirico-like colonnades (plural) somewhere, and railway stations.

But I see that in three translations we have, variously,

It was out of the black country, country of lakes and of poles,  
Of colonnades under the blue night, and of mooring-places.

(Claire McAllister)

These were dark lands, lakes and poles,  
Colonnades beneath the blue night, harbors.

(Wyatt Mason)

It was black countries, lakes, [long] poles,  
Colonnades under the blue night, railway stations.

(Oliver Bernard)

## XXIII

So since there's no way of conflating mooring places (sort of small, given those poles), harbours, and railway stations, it would appear that Rimbaud was using, without guiding the reader, one of those pluri-signifying words, "gare," that the dictionary will unpack for you, plus

a simple-seeming word, “perches,” that leaves you having to figure out what kinds of poles but gives you a “pole” feeling (things sticking up in that darkened landscape), plus the seemingly fuller “colonnades” that leaves you having to hunt again in your mind for what kind they would be.

So there’s an extra mysteriousness there, over and above where and how he’s drinking (or perhaps not drinking; the final stanza is also difficult in the way the second is).

But even if the difficulties were cleared up (if you did research and found what part of northern France and Belgium Rimbaud passed through and what he might have seen there), the movement in the stanza would *still* be mysterious, because you still don’t know the thought processes leading from that inn sign to those other things.

And you have the feeling of those details in the landscape being so clear in his mind’s eye as to need no contextualizing.

Winters rightly (and admiringly) called the poem hallucinatory.

## XXIV

Lastly, one of the old Verlaine favourites, and none the worse for that.

We have here a precision of external detail, and the feel of things, and virtually no analysis of his “inner” feelings, and yet we’re perfectly happy with that, at least I am, since some moods may *not* in fact be susceptible of easy description and classification.

Poems, like fictional characters (Hamlet, Sherlock Holmes) can give us epitomes.

If Baudelaire’s “Hymne” gives us adoration, and Rimbaud’s “Au Cabaret-Vert” an innocent contentment, Verlaine in “Dans l’Interminable Ennui” gives us—well, *you* decide. It’s a brilliant poem.

Dans l’interminable  
Ennui de la plaine,  
La neige incertaine  
Luit comme du sable.

Le ciel est de cuivre

Sans lueur aucune.  
On croirait voir vivre  
Et mourir la lune.

Comme des nuées  
Flottent gris les chênes  
Des forêts prochaines  
Parmi les buées.

Le ciel est de cuivre  
Sans lueur aucune.  
On croirait voir vivre  
Et mourir la lune.

Corneille poussive  
Et vous, les loups maigres,  
Par ces bises aigres  
Quoi donc vous arrivez?

Dans l'interminable  
Ennui de la plaine,  
La neige incertaine  
Luit comme du sable.

## XXV

Here it is in Muriel Kittell's excellent translation:

In the unending  
Tedium of the plain  
The uncertain snow  
Gleams like sand.

The copper sky  
Has no light at all  
You think you can see  
The moon live and die.

Like clouds the oaks  
Of nearby forests  
Are gray, and float  
Among the mists.

The copper sky  
Has no light at all.  
You think you can see  
The moon live and die.

Broken-winded crow  
And you, gaunt wolves,  
What happens to you  
In these harsh winds?

In the unending  
Tedium of the plain  
The indistinct snow  
Gleams like sand.

## XXVI

So the tectonic shift that I talked about in “Powers of Style” didn’t in the least preclude the mysterious, the elusive, the not easily definable in poetry. It was not a banalization of experience, particularly not the kind that comes with the repeated assertion that our world is an affair of texts and fictions.

On the contrary, it much enlarged the means of defining complex experiences.

Eliot was able to reconfigure at least some aspects of Christianity to his own satisfaction, Yeats found room enough for the pagan supernatural, and Rilke and Stevens went off into dimensions where I myself am largely incapable of following them with understanding.

But there’s a differences, as E.M. Forster pointed out in *A Passage to India*, between mysteries and muddles.

Beware the kind of “difficult” poem where the author, incited perhaps by an imperfect acquaintance with the masterpieces of the French Symbolist movement, evidently believes that he/she has something *profound* to say about major topics and that it must be said in a programmatically difficult way.

Some teacher-critics have probably had a lot to answer for.

## XXVII

Winters' discussion in *Forms of Discovery* of what he calls Post-Symbolist methods is *major*. He shows how a coherent, heuristic, thinking-through can go on in a poem, a thinking-through in which formal features and the sharpness of sensory detail that we have in some of the best Symbolist poetry are essential elements, not just the adornments of a tacit thesis-statement.

The poetry of some of his own students and associates as displayed in the later pages of his and Kenneth Fields' anthology *Quest for Reality*, has an intellectual weight and intensity that had been largely absent from English-language poetry since the seventeenth century, and the absence of which is all the more noticeable when you look at what was going on in the nineteenth century in *French* poetry

Winters never said that you have to be making rational statements in poems. He said that what you say ought to be rationally defensible.

To try to cope in a rationally defensible fashion with "unreasonable" matters need by no means entail being ("neo-classically") without strong feelings. You may in fact be feeling *more* intensely, more appropriately, and with more possibilities of growth, in part because of a greater consciousness of the potential seriousness of error.

## XXVIII

A word or two, in closing, about "genius," with the aid of some non-literary examples.

## XXIX

Pushkin's Eugene Onegin whiled away the tedium of the steppes playing French billiards, on a table without pockets, an interminable affair of canons.

But the perfect game, the table game of all table games, is snooker, for in it an almost uniquely, difficult perfection is possible. Sink all the balls in the complicated perfect order and you can, very rarely indeed, only the masters can do it, achieve the perfect maximum score of 147 points.

In a snooker break, there can be no relaxing. An initial success does not guarantee a subsequent one, and each stroke must be concentrated on afresh as if the player had never sunk a previous ball. The effect is cumulative and increasingly impressive, as each ball goes down. But the pattern can be broken at any point.

And part of the thrill of a great snooker break, like that of a prodigious juggling act, is the recognition that at every point, right up to the end, a slip, or a less than perfect move, is always possible.

### XXX

A knowledgeable commentator, himself a championship player, opined a few years ago that Stephen Hendry was the greatest snooker player *ever*. You could see why.

Hendry in his prime was simply the consummate complete player. Not only did he make his own long marvelous breaks. He was totally unfazed by what his opponents did, even when (like Jimmy White) they might be making long breaks themselves or winning several games in a row while he himself sat and watched impassively, simply each time taking up his cue when it was his own turn and observing how the configuration was at *that* point, and playing accordingly. A total Zen-like concentration.

Maybe golf aficionados feel the same way about Tiger Woods?

I am of course inferring what *had* to have been happening from what did happen. I have never heard Hendry say anything onscreen about his “thinking” while playing.

For that matter, I don’t recall hearing any other snooker player do so either, and a very good thing too. The top players have their own styles, but snooker, in contrast to tennis, is not a game for demonstrations of temperament or personality, and self-consciousness is what *loses* you a game when you become too aware of how much rests on a single shot, like a single putt in golf.

### XXXI

But it’s a bit like those comments of Kafka’s about the airshow that I quote in “Lagniappe.” Hendry, like Bleriot, performed perfectly, but

when the word “genius” sprang to my lips, it was when (all this on TV, of course) I was watching the young newcomer Ronnie O’Sullivan, playing I forget whom, but at any rate someone very good.

Ronnie cleared the table for the maximum, and he did it *effortlessly*, so impatient to make the next stroke that he could barely wait until the referee had replaced a coloured ball (the reds not yet all sunk) back on its prescribed spot. He scarcely seemed to be aiming. It was as if he simply took for granted that he could make any shot that he tried for, and was following a vision in his mind’s eye of how the sequence had to go—not necessarily a clear sharp image from the outset, but an intuitive sense of relationships and sequences.

It was extraordinary, and it looked effortless, and I think it was. He was insouciant. He wasn’t being arrogant, he was simply doing what was there in front of him.

Names like Mozart and Rimbaud came to mind. He was *young*. And I knew nothing about him, hadn’t heard his name, hadn’t seen him play before.

Checking in Google, I see that “he has completed six maximums, including the five fastest of all time.” Maybe the one I watched was the miracle one in 1997 in 320 seconds?

## XXXII

But what was *implied* there when I thought “genius”?

Well, I did indeed, watching that match, wonder whether there was now a newcomer in town who was going to surpass all the other players for the next few years . Which is to say *keep* doing those prodigious things.

But it was the *things* that were prodigious, in that particular match. So I suppose the accurate thing to have said was not that he *was* a genius, but that it was a performance of genius, that he “showed” genius, and that he was probably going to go on like this, a new grand master of a beautiful game.

Like Joe Montana in American pro football. Like Tiger Woods.

And I think that the same, *mutatis mutandis*, is true of the artist.

### XXXIII

So far as I can see, what we're talking about when we say "genius" is someone brilliantly doing something very difficult and very worth doing, and which stays good regardless of what comes after it, since it cannot be transcended, and which is beyond the capacity of the merely excellent.

The achievement may be all the more remarkable because of the youth of the artist (Rimbaud, Lautréamont), or the brevity of the creative career (Hölderlin), or the lack of trial runs (*Wuthering Heights*), or the sustained imaginative energy and courage required for its completion (*Moby-Dick*, *War and Peace*, the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel), or the ongoing sequence of different masterpieces (Shakespeare). But it isn't those things that *make* the work remarkable.

And given the notorious fluctuations in creative careers, the fallings away after an initial flair (Bix, Orson), and the unevenness of individual works (Dickens), it may be natural to say of someone consistently remarkable (Leonardo, Bach) that he or she *was* a genius. But this isn't to attribute to them a different *kind* of knowledge and perception, any more than a Ronnie O'Sullivan or a Stephen Hendry are different in kind from you and me knocking balls around in a local pool hall.

What they're different in is quality. At times even a tyro can make a shot that surprises him and his opponent equally.

### XXXIV

Winters cut through a lot of obfuscation when he suggested in the introduction to *Forms of Discovery* that "*Beauty* is merely a term denoting exceptional excellence of one kind or another, and it usually involves the idea of pleasing proportions." The knowledgeable can talk about beautiful equations, and beautiful battles, and beautiful knock-outs in boxing, and beautiful shots in snooker.

The right formulation seems to me to be to speak of works, and acts, and individuals (meaning their acts) *of* genius.

So that as well as saying, if you wish to, that *Macbeth* is a work of genius, you can also speak of military campaigns of genius, and jazz



singers of genius (Billie), and feats of navigation of genius (Captain Bligh cast adrift after the mutiny), and sheep-dog trainers of genius.

None of which entails being always good, as if by some kind of divine fiat. Or remarkable outside your area(s) of competence.

### XXXV

Somewhere or other, Ezra Pound quotes or paraphrases Aristotle to the effect that an exact perception of resemblances is a hallmark of genius. Insofar as there might be a common denominator in creative intelligence at any level, rather than simply a Wittgensteinian “family” of partly overlapping traits, it might be that.

It is what we see, certainly, when the 18<sup>th</sup>-century playwright Sheridan as a Member of Parliament enquired drily, one Irishman to another, after Edmund Burke had hurled a dagger onto the floor of the House at the close of a peroration, “Where’s the fork?” Or when it first occurred to someone that such *utterly* different things as the starlings on your lawn and some of the dinosaurs of prehistory might be kin.

Or when Shakespeare went on generating metaphor after metaphor that entered and stayed in the language because of their usefulness and not because they were by Him—a tower of strength, at one fell swoop, with bated breath, the seamy side, and so on. (Logan Pearsall Smith lists eighty-seven familiar idioms that come from the plays.

### XXXVI

Personally I think that the word “genius” is of very little use, except as a kind of glorified “Wow!” Its use doesn’t make individual works any better, and sometimes cheapens them.

Almost the only time when I manifestly *annoyed* Carol Hoorn Fraser in connection with her art was when in the early Sixties I looked at some painting of hers and exclaimed she was a genius. “Don’t *say* that,” she snapped.

I think she probably meant that in art the term should be reserved for her revered Van Gogh and Rembrandt and a handful of others. But she may also have felt, correctly, that it diminished the long and arduous

apprenticeship that she was still serving, and the struggles that she was still having with individual works.

And when the word is taken to mean (analogously to deciding that a particular bar of metal is beryllium) that there's a consistency throughout the "mind" of this or that writer or artist, so that anything they do will be distinguished and anything they say will be worth attending to, it can only do harm, being wildly out of accord with the observable facts, blurring the perception of differences between and inside individual works, and inviting a profitless game of pigeonholing

It encourages authoritarianism and subservience.

### XXXVII

The American craving for sages, whether Emerson, or Einstein, or Derrida, whose every word can be hung onto because of their privileged insights is understandable.

It's an attempt to ground values when you don't have a secure religious faith the way that Catholicism used to be, or a set of social structures and observances that are simply taken for granted.

But attitudes can be understandable and wrong. In fact, wrong beliefs are usually more understandable ones. (Of *course* the sun rises in the morning and goes down at night.)

As we have all heard a good deal by now, seers and sages are chronically vulnerable as generators of texts, since no one sermon or edict or versified utterance carries with it an authenticating seal.

In some shelf of some hexagon [Borges is speaking of his imagined hive-like Library of Babel], there must exist a book which is the cipher and perfect compendium *of all the rest...*; some librarian has perused it, and it is analogous to a god. ...How to locate the secret hexagon which harbored it? Someone proposed a regressive approach: in order to locate book A, first consult book B which will indicate the location of A; in order to locate book B, first consult book C, and so on ad infinitum.... [ellipses sic]

As Borges also knew, if you despair of the possibility of perfect knowledge and the right courses of action that it can ensure, relieving you of the at times intolerable burden of repeated moral choices in

situations that aren't covered precisely by formulae, you may give up on the idea of accurate perception and reasoning in general, and lapse into a nihilistic subjectivism, whether "existentially" gloomy or complacently hedonistic.

And besides, are there *any* geniuses in 20<sup>th</sup>-century American literature? Personally I can't think of one, unless you allow Edith Sitwell's characterization of the 21-year-old Eliot, author already of "Portrait of a Lady," as "this youth of genius."

It's genes, not genius, that you find in bottles.

But a good deal of true knowledge can in fact be obtained by a discriminating use of intelligence. Including where poetry is concerned.

# Winters, Leavis, and Language

## I

As William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, said about its brassy street music, “Why should the Devil have all the good tunes?”

Meaning, here, what *chutzpah* it is to imply that “theory,” literary theory, didn’t really begin until Derrida and De Man, in their twin act, hit East Coast American academe like the Beatles.

I am thinking, especially, of the idea that language needs to be “problematized,” in particular the presumption of a one-to-one correspondence between words, and, for want of a better word, things.

Derrida was obviously engaged in a long, superstitious, and, at bottom, unsuccessful struggle to free himself from the twin claims of Platonism and the Kabbalah with respect to the intrinsic truth-bearing nature of words.

De Man, equally obviously, was operating within the framework of a naïve Cartesian dualism, with, on the one hand, the impersonal and inorganic *real* universe of physics (there’s a sentence of his somewhere or other where he actually mentions “atoms,” or was it molecules?) and, on the other, the unanchored, arbitrary games of language—of mere words and, insofar as words are used to articulate values, “mere” values.

I won’t be mentioning either of them again here.

## II

Early in Yvor Winters’ *In Defense of Reason* there’s an exemplary passage from 1937 about the nature of poetry. I have broken up the paragraphs and provided numbers to make reading and commenting easier. The emphases are mine.

## III

(1) [L]anguage is a kind of abstraction, even at its most concrete; such a word as “cat,” for instance, is generic and not particular. Such a word becomes particular only in so far as it gets into some kind of

experiential complex, which qualifies it and limits it, which gives it, in short, a local habitation as well as a name.

[As in, let's say, Thomas Gray's "On a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes," or William Carlos Williams' "Poem," or Stevie Smith's "The Galloping Cat," or the yellow fog passage in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," or Christopher Smart's "For I will consider my cat Jeoffrey," or B. Kliban's "Love to eat them mousies," or Eliot's "The Naming of Cats," or Gavin Ewart's "A 14-year Old Convalescent Cat in the Winter."]

(2) Such a complex is the poetic line *or other unit*, which, in turn, should be a functioning part of the larger complex, or poem.

[No cat is instantly *there* (the sign "full") in a poem. A "cat", or cattishness, enters and starts *becoming*, phrase by phrase, line by line, like Ted Hughes' "Thought-Fox," where first there's just a nose "touching twig, leaf," and then the movement of wary eyes, and footprints appearing in the snow, and finally "a sudden sharp hot stink of fox."

A diversity of felines: "I want him to have another living summer," "The naming of cats is a difficult matter," "I am a cat that likes to/ Gallop about doing good," "As the cat/ climbed over/the top of," "The yellow fog that rubs its muzzle on the window panes," "Twas on a lofty vase's side," "Love to eat them mousies" ("Mousies what I love to eat,/ Bite they little heads off.../ Nibble on they tiny feet").

The signifier of straight lines and curves *c/a/t* is empty. As are *c/ha/t*, *k/a/t/z*, *g/a/t/o*, and § (my own ad hoc signifier today).

They are like small circles, some solid, some hollow, set on and between thin horizontal lines, meaningless unless "heard," whether spectrally for your own voice, or a cello, or xylophones, or massed choirs. (They are meaningless to me. I "hear" nothing at all, beyond the vague recognition that sounds must be going up or down in pitch, and vary in duration.)

The *sound* "katt" (or "pussy") that a child makes is always a pointing—a house pet walking or sleeping or acting up, an unfamiliar tom strolling across the summer lawn, a cat in a hat

dancing in a book—those shapes, those movements, are all part (or parts) of the child’s “sign.”

The words of mists-of-time ancestral communities that we’d translate as “tiger” weren’t just *said*, like coughs or hiccups. They came with, and were part of, that particular dead animal, or prowling live one, or suspicious noise in the thickets, or those things being recalled in narratives.

All of which gets pared away later during the production of essentialized definitions for legal or scientific purposes.

I still remember being confronted in a scholarship exam with, “Define an orange.”

Impossible! For me, anyway.

An orange was its pitted orange rind, and the pith your finger nails started digging into as you burrowed through it, and the segments in their membranes, and the tingling juice that spurted into your mouth when you bit into one of them.

It was nice coming a dozen years ago on Rilke’s advice/command, as translated by David Young (*Tanzt die Orange/ Dance the orange*), to

Peel away, radiant,  
Fragrance on fragrance! Create a kinship  
With the pure and reluctant rind,  
With the juice that loads the ecstatic fruit!]

(3) This is, I imagine [Winters again], what Mallarmé should have had in mind when he demanded that the poetic line be a new word, not found in any dictionary, and partaking of the nature of incantations (that is, having the power to materialize, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, *being* a new experience).

[“Hilare or de cymbale à des poings irrité” (Mallarmé)—hilarious cymbal gold angered/excited by fists”—and no, this doesn’t simply dwindle down to the one word “sun.” It’s a new seeing/feeling/ experiencing of that shape in the sky, that illumination, that warmth on the skin.]

(4) The poem, to be perfect, should likewise be a new word in the same sense, a word of which the line, as we have defined it, is merely a syllable.

[Leavis spoke approvingly of a 1936 review-article on T.S. Eliot in which D.W. Harding suggested that

one could say, perhaps, that [*Burnt Norton*] takes the place of the ideas of 'regret' and 'eternity.' Where in ordinary speech we should have to use those words, and hope by conversational trial-and-error to obviate the grossest misunderstandings, this poem is a newly-created concept, equally abstract but vastly more exact and rich in meaning."]

(5) Such a word is, of course, composed of much more than the sum of its words (as one normally uses the term) and its syntax.

(6) It is composed of an almost fluid complex, if the adjective and the noun are not too nearly contradictory, of relationships between words (in the normal sense of the term), a relationship involving rational content, cadences, rhymes, juxtapositions, literary and other connotations, inversions, and so on, almost indefinitely.

[Yes indeed, though not all necessarily in the same poem.]

(7) These relationships, it should be obvious, extend the poet's vocabulary incalculably. They partake of the fluidity and unpredictability of experience and so provide a means of *treating* experience with precision and freedom.

[Yes.]

(8) If the poet does not wish, as actually he seldom does, to reproduce a given experience with approximate exactitude, he can employ the experience as a basis for a new experience that will be just as real, in the sense of being particular, and perhaps more valuable.

[The poet might remember a summer night when he was in the fields going to meet his lover and there were some glowworms, and he could describe that. Or he could be Andrew Marvell and write "The Mower to the Glow-Worms."]

(9) Now verse is more valuable than prose in this process for the simple reason that its rhythms are *faster* and *more highly organized*

than are those of prose, and so lend themselves to a greater complexity and compression of relationship, and that the intensity of this convention renders possible a greater intensity of other desirable conventions, such as poetic language and devices of rhetoric.

[The term “prose” is a much broader-spectrum one than “poetry.” But there are rhythmic phrasings of *some* kind, clunky or elaborate, plangent or staccato, etcetera, in passages of prose, and it’s possible to use most of the other resources that Winters lists, so that in fact there is no sharp boundary between “prose” and “poetry.” It’s a spectrum, not a dichotomy. If you read out loud a passage of “verse” and a passage of “prose,” you are both times reading out sequences of phrasal units.]

(10) The writer of prose must substitute bulk for this kind of intensity; he must define his experience ordinarily by giving all of its past history, the narrative logic leading up to it, whereas the experiential relations given in a good lyric poem, though particular in themselves, are applicable without alteration to a good many past histories.

[You’d look very odd announcing out of the blue on a sheet of paper—and *where?*—that someone you were in love with reminded you of a rose and nice tunes and that you’d always love her dearly. Who is this man, who’s this woman, how old are they, and so forth? A fiction writer or dramatist would have to do quite a bit of filling in.

But if you say,

O my Luve’s like a red red rose  
That’s newly sprung in June;  
O my Luve’s like the melodie  
That’s sweetly played in tune,

and the reader, at least one who’s read other poems, sees that the lines don’t go all the way to the right margin and that there’s a title at the top, he or she won’t be bothered.

All manner of individuals, young, old, rich, poor, English, Asian-Indian, etc, can feel that Burns’ poem describes how they themselves feel—provides a concept that more accurately fits their feelings than simply saying “I’m in love. I’m *really* in love. I’ll love her forever” would do. The phrase “in love” simply doesn’t



do the work (“Please answer the question. Yes or no, did you or did you not love the plaintiff?”)

W.H. Auden has a charming poem, “O Tell Me the Truth about Love.” (“Does it look like a pair of pyjamas/ Or the ham in a temperance hotel?” and so on.)]

(11) In this sense, the lyric is general as well as particular; in fact, this quality of transferable or generalized experience might be regarded as the defining quality of lyrical poetry.

[Which doesn’t mean that it always happens, or that a poem can’t be considered a lyric poem if it doesn’t happen, but that it *can* happen—and happen faster than in a play or novel, where it takes a while to “receive” what’s going on.]

(12) What I have just said should make plain the difficulty of comprehending a poem *exactly* and *fully*; its *total* intention may be *very* different from its *paraphrasable*, or purely *logical* contents.

[Emphasis mine. Maybe this is the element of truth that is obfuscated in portentous statements about the impossibility of “understanding” a literary text, if by “understanding” is meant the ability to give a totalizing account that would reproduce the effect of (and virtually *be*) the original text.]

#### IV

Linguistically, what Winters has said in this passage is pretty sophisticated with respect to both the alleged indeterminacy of words and the alleged claim that words only “mean” in relation to other words.

(He was in his thirties and reading Mallarmé intently at a time when Clever Jacques was still in knee pants.)

If a rural Texan tells you that a friend of his is “a good ol’ boy,” he’s not saying that he’s good (in the conventional moral sense) and old and a boy. The friend may not be any of those things. The phrase “good old boy,” with its definite Southern meaning, is in effect a new word, or term, or, if you prefer, sign.

And the three terms that have been dissolved into it are themselves not all that definite to start with. It is really only convenience that puts “old” in the sense of “advanced in years” and “old” in the sense of “former” in the same dictionary slot. The signifiers may look the same, the way a couple of matches do, but the signifieds are sharply different and only come into being in context.

The phrases “*my old cat*” and “*my old chemistry teacher*” (as distinct from “*my old chemistry teacher,*” meaning not my *young* one), are in effect different signs, or terms, or, if you prefer, “words.”

But with a modicum of familiarity with Southern speech, you would still know that if you were to call on the neighbour you wouldn’t find a scrawny, pinch-mouthed, Bible-quoting moralist who wouldn’t offer you a drink.

Some of us didn’t have to wait for Derrida and De Man to liberate us from naïve one-to-one-correspondence ideas of language.

## V

The point of all this, I mean why I’m presenting Winters’ passage here (over and above offering a reminder that my favourite critic of poetry did not, repeat *not*, say that poems must always be offering rational arguments), is that it’s the repertoire of local precisions and at times *almost* invisible but cumulative metrical adjustments that make possible the expressive precision of the whole work.

Robert Burns didn’t try to validate his love, or the speaker’s love, by claiming the authority of autobiography (“I’m a very loving person with a deep capacity for love, as I’ve noticed with pleasure over the years and been told about by friends, so that when I say I love here you can be quite sure that I really *do* love her, because I know myself very well, the way my favourite poet William Wordsworth knew *himself*.”)

Or by pointing to some extra-personal force or presence. (“The Divine Spirit of Love which animates the Universe and is at work in us all has taken possession of me and allowed no room for any earthly doubts, so that I can solemnly affirm with my hand pressed to my heart that I love her totally and beyond words, as used to happen also to my favourite poet P.B. Shelley.”)

Either, you might be inclined to think, what a jerk! (*quel con!*) Or wonder what Dickens might have done with such a character.

Instead, after the opening rose-and-sweet-melody similes, Burns gives us:

As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,  
So deep in luvè am I;  
And I will love thee still, my Dear,  
Till a' the seas gang dry.—

Till a' the seas gang dry, my Dear,  
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;  
I will love thee still, my Dear,  
While the sands o' life shall run.—

## VI

If you don't get *some* kind of tingle from the combining of the colloquial “bonnie lass” and “my Dear” with the lift-off into vast time and space with *all* the seas going dry (and “deep” contributing an initial sense of wetness)

—and then the intensification of *that* with the repetition of the line

—and the tactile extension of the image with the vast heat of the sun melting the exposed rocks (he hadn't just casually grabbed a passing metaphor)

—and the intensification *there* with the reversed foot that throws an unexpected stress on “melt”

—and then the return from mega-vistas to the more domesticated image of the hour-glass, but with a hint of rocks not only melted but dried to sand, and the contrasting memory trace of the fresh spring flower in the opening stanza; well, you'd be receiving only a thin version of the poem.

And if someone were to object that the speaker isn't going to be able to live that long, so he's a manipulative braggart; or that we can't tell whether he's being sincere or not unless we know the circumstances of the poem's composition—well, poetry might not really be his cup of tea, might it?

Personally I don't need to know more than the poem itself, any more than did and do, I imagine, the tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of readers who have loved it.

It would be no less effective were it anonymous or virtually anonymous, like Mark Alexander Boyd's "Fra bank to bank."

And you can see how, yes, it could indeed function like a "word" or sign (in Saussure's sense), so that instead of saying, "I'm in love," one could say (or think), "I feel [like] that poem."

## VII

In a brief statement designed to help get Ezra Pound released from St. Elizabeth's mental hospital, Hemingway said that it was no more possible not to have been influenced as a writer by Pound than to traverse a desert without feeling the heat.

What F.R. Leavis says about figurative language in a few pages of *Education and the University* (1943) must have imprinted similarly on a lot of readers.

Leavis moves in on Matthew Arnold's sonnet "To Shakespeare," the one that begins, "'Others abide our question. Thou art free./ We ask and ask. Thou smilest and art still,'" and pounces on the comparison of Shakespeare to a lofty hill that you see "Planting his steadfast footsteps in the sea." It introduces, as he rightly says, "a ludicrous suggestion of gigantic, ponderously wading strides."

(Three years later, in "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell would give us the Fascist octopus singing its many-armed swan-song.)

## VIII

So (polite yawn behind back of hand), mixed tropes, eh?

Well, not quite, or least that's not all. After observing that Arnold's phrasing "could only have been offered by an unrealizing mind, handling words from the outside," Leavis goes on to remark:

But it will not do to say simply that in good poetry the metaphors are realized. In fact there are hardly any rules that can, with any

profit, be laid down: the best critical terms and concepts one can find or provide oneself with will be inadequate to the varied complexities with which the critic has to deal.

And he offers in half a dozen pages some superb brief analyses of several passages from *Macbeth* of which you can indeed feel that words are being used from “inside” Macbeth soliloquizing just before Duncan’s murder (the murder of a *king*) in terms that go beyond (or not as far as) a merely visual comparison of one definite thing with another.

Quoting the sentence

I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself  
And falls on the other [side],

he comments:

Macbeth’s ‘intent’ of murder is, to his feeling, quite other than himself; as external to himself as an unwilling horse between his thighs; he can muster no impulse sharp enough to prick it into action. Then, with a rapid change in his psychological relation to the horse, he expresses the sense of difficulty and danger that produces this paralysis—a sense at the same time of the supreme effort required (he is gathered tense for vaulting—this point in the speech is a good instance of the expressive use of line division) and of the terrifying impossibility of making sure that the process once started can be stopped at the point of achievement in view.

And then comes a further caution: “It will not do to treat metaphors, images and other local effects as if their relation to the poem were at all like that of plums to cake, or stones attesting that the jam is genuine.”

## IX

If Leavis hadn’t “attacked” Milton and Shelley, his reputation would surely have been a good deal different.

His deflationary remarks about *Paradise Lost* infuriated the kinds of readers who wanted to feel that here was, if not the voice of God, at least a Godlike voice that you could be borne along by trustingly.

But worse, I suspect, was Leavis' examination of the figurative language in Shelley's "When the Lamp is Shattered," his scrutinizing of the metaphors, his testing of them out in truth-to-terms (light *lying* in the *dust* after a lamp is *broken?*), his teasing out of the syntax to figure out exactly *who* is being commiserated with.

You can sense, as you read the analysis now, the resentment of readers back then who just *knew* how the young-god-like Shelley felt, and who believed themselves that the world (and Love) were indeed as he seemed to be saying they were, and who sensed that they themselves were being brought into question in the analysis, and that that was *not* what they went to poetry for.

Poetry was supposed to be a simple fit—the poetic self and How Things Really Were.

Here, instead, was Leavis focusing on the heuristic process as word followed word, and engaging in a species of deconstruction long before Paul de Man, infuriated by the *New York Review of Books*' rejection of one of his smoothly literary-journalistic review-articles, swerved away to the kind of intent pouncing on "betraying" details (often tropes), and refusal to let things drop in argument as if at the end of a well-played set of tennis, that Leavis had displayed in *Scrutiny* in his 1935 review-article on I.A. Richards' *Coleridge on Imagination* and his 1953 exchange with F.W. Bateson.

## X

Leavis was a very great critic, whose essential subject, it seems to me, was language—its Kierkegaardian "appropriation," its role in creating and maintaining values (both individual and communal), its maladies. He was way ahead of Heidegger and Gadamer.

But Winters was writing from the inside as a poet, a poet talking in part to other poets, including ones not yet in being, and Leavis was not.

And though Leavis could obviously have described formal features in formal terms (rather than reader-response ones) had he wished to, he chose *not* to, not least, I imagine, because it would have encouraged supposedly “objective” analyses, and the perception of texts as dualities in which “forms” existed independently of expressive utterance.

His influence on the *writing* of poetry, particularly given his preference for the major over the minor, and for a quasi-dramatic mode of utterance as a manifestation of an “inward” concern with life-values, whether in Shakespeare or Hopkins, or Donne, or Eliot, may not have been an unmixed blessing.

And it was, and maybe still is, insidiously easy to misapply, because misperceiving, what he was doing when he pounced on the “betraying” trope in “To Shakespeare.”

## XI

If that particular stretch of language caught the eye, it wasn’t in the sense that a dermatologist’s eye, scanning or skimming a smooth surface of healthy skin, is arrested by the blemish that signals an underlying, a perhaps incurable sickness—the way the body *really* is.

The weakness of the writing was there in the sonnet from the outset, though habituation to a particular style could have lulled you into missing it.

And such a lulling may be a necessary or at least a labour-saving mechanism when you have to read in bulk, and the writing, particularly if it’s free verse, isn’t *flagrantly* dreadful, and you’re waiting for something to catch your attention and slow you down.

But things go wrong when you assume that what you’re in search of is clues to the real, the innate “sensibility” of the writer, like a thought-police commissar waiting for betraying signs of someone’s *true* feelings about race, or gender, or social organization.

Or a religious heresy-hunter earlier.

The term “Leavisite,” with its implications of a puritanical narrowness, obviously didn’t fit writers for *Scrutiny* like D.W. Harding, Q.D. Leavis, L.C. Knights, W.H. Mellers, D.J. Enright, and others, any more

than it now fits the wide-ranging minds of Michael Tanner—philosopher, music reviewer, Wagner freak—and Michael Black.

But it did fit the odious H.A. Mason in his role as *Scrutiny's* hatchetman. (He literally almost never praised a writer, which makes you start imagining a song paralleling “That’s Entertainment,” the refrain of which would be, “That’s *Standards!*”) And it could be irritating or worse to come up against the kind of Downing-educated person who, while not running the risks attendant on celebrations (I mean, of works and authors outside the *Scrutiny* canon), assumed that he (it was normally a he) was sufficiently serving the life of the mind by—sniff! sniff!—detecting the ineradicable insufficiencies of sensibility in others.

Which no doubt contributed to the collapse of so-called practical criticism at Cambridge, meaning the making of intelligent comments on unfamiliar and unidentified poems or passages of prose, both fiction and non-fiction. And which left emerging graduates less equipped to deal with the deterioration of political discourse.

## XII

One does, of course, get impatient in one’s phrasing. This or that novelist, or poet, or movie-maker simply stinks, is third-rate, terminally mediocre, fatally lacking in originality, and so on. Leavis himself spoke in that fashion at times. But it’s still shorthand.

And the superiority of Winters, there, is that he was *always* talking about texts, whether complete works or passages in works, and was judging those, and the quality of thinking and feeling in *them*, and not an abstraction called the “mind” of the writer.

The judging could go both ways, too. You might come upon something unexpectedly good in a work or oeuvre, as well as something more than usually bad.

It is an Aristotelian, not a Calvinist take on the world. What you do or say or write may be damnable at times. But it is damnable in itself, and not because it results from, and discloses, the fact that you are one of the damned.



# Language and Being

## I

Back in the Fifties, when I was teaching composition at the University of Minnesota, there used to be (perhaps there still is?) a handbook distinction between denotations, connotations, and personal associations.

To illustrate it I would say, OK, here's a defense lawyer pointing to his client and demanding of the jury, "How can you, I mean how *can* you convict this man here before you—a soldier, a *husband*, a FATHER?"

But in fact, said I, the accused spent most of his soldiering days in the stockade, and it was a shotgun marriage from which he fled at the earliest opportunity, and as for fathering the child who elicited the shotgun, well ...

"Soldier"? "Husband"? "Father"?

So all the, in those days, noble images evoked by those terms (the connotations) were not in fact intrinsic to the basic, value-neutral, dictionary meanings of the terms (the denotations).

And were different again from private association, the images each juryman had of his or her (but in those days it would mostly have been his) own father.

## II

This paradigm seems to me relevant when terms like "poem," "poet," "poetry" come up honorifically, I mean among so-called literate people (another connotation there!), not those back-row jocks for whom, in the days when Brooks and Warren and others were defending poetry, they signaled either fancy-pants verbiage or a hideous obstacle course over which their academic drill-masters were driving them.

("And nerves that never flinched at slaughter/  
Were shot to pieces by the shorter/  
Poems of Donne"—thus W.H. Auden in the very funny "Under Which Lyre," delivered at a 1946 Harvard commencement.)

### III

Why does one instinctively want to ascribe merit to poetry (as distinct from “mere” verse)—want to feel that when A Poet utters, there’s some kind of truth and authority there? For this still goes on, doesn’t it?

Partly, I would guess, there’s an identification with *potency*, as in the doings of great and good athletes, or any other activity in which individuals transcend, in a more than merely personal way, the limits of everydayness and averages.

One yearns to be authoritative oneself—to be able to speak intelligently on any topic that comes along, rather than be the actual fumbling adolescent that one was, or the grown man still making asinine mistakes that undercut his claims to trustworthiness, as I did in a letter of recommendation some years ago when I spoke of “the old campy Adam West Superman series” that I was reduced to watching those days at supper time. Superman? It’s *Batman*, for Heaven’s sake.

One wants to be authoritative, too, *about* oneself—be able to describe accurately how one acts and thinks, what one believes, what one did and felt on some particular occasion—a family row, a letter written, a movie watched.

Above all, perhaps, one desires to be *authentic*, to feel that one’s values are sound and that one can speak and feel instinctively in the right way—being effectively diagnostic, predictive, ameliorative in particular situations, and not finding later on that one’s made serious mistakes.

How yummy, too, particularly if one’s an institutional intellectual, to be a sage, a guru, a Wise Man or Woman, and paid and privileged and attended to accordingly. How nice to be University Professor of High Thinking R. W. Emerson. Or Extraordinary Professor of Philosophy J.-P. Sartre. Or Amazingly Brilliant Professor J. Derrida. (With only one class a year, naturally.)

What bliss! Saint Logorrhea, pray for us! Licence to spill—and to make bad puns. (But does anyone still consider Sartre a Truly Great Philosopher ?)

I guess there's a sense of Truly Great Poets, or simply the generic connotational Poet, as possessing some of that power-charged fluency. Despite all the talk about the disappearing "author."

Wordsworth *kept on talking*. Like Walt Whitman. Like Allen Ginsberg.

"Author...L *auctor*, enlarger, author < *augere*, to increase..."

Potency!

#### IV

There's also a heritage here, isn't there?

The bard was story-teller, narrator, remembrancer, historian, the person who could keep telling, keep speaking lucidly, whether in hunting narratives, or sagas, or epics. As happens still with the gifted village or family story-teller ("And what happened then, Gran, what happened when the moose came back, what did Granpa *do*?" "Well, dears...")

And if you include the visions of the shaman/priest, born aloft on the wings of some pharmacologically interesting substance,... Pow!

Smooth-flowing, seemingly effortless speech presenting experiences in a way that carries conviction is so enviable, at least for me. (How many of us are great or even good joke-tellers?)

And of course a lot of poems and prose can feel like that, particularly if you're someone to whom language does *not* come easily—for whom simply writing a letter to a bureaucrat may be agony, draft after draft (before the computer) crumpled up and missing the waste-basket.

#### V

So you forget, even if aware of them intellectually, the testified-to agonies, the multiple drafts, the pencillings out of which this or that novel, story, poem, essay came.

Achieving naturalness can be a pretty unnatural activity.

Scott Fitzgerald speaks somewhere of the labour that went into the effortless-seeming *Gatsby*. For T.S. Eliot in his fifties,

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—

Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres*—  
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure...

It can take so long, Yeats said, to learn how you *really* feel about anything.

That is, if one hasn't had the benefit of a self-esteem job assuring one, from infancy on, that whatever one creates is g-o-o-o-o-d because issuing organically from one's own beautiful soul (in contrast to the long, patient, and complex *shaping* of an individual self that Rousseau, imagining himself a tutor with total authority, details in his educational classic *Emile*).

## VI

If writing weren't so hard— I mean, when you know the difference between getting something right and having it slip away out of reach —, there wouldn't have been so much wreckage in the life of authorship.

My eye has just returned to a list on the board over my desk, found I don't remember where, of twenty-seven well-known twentieth-century American writers who were alcoholics. It must be far from complete.

Poor Hemingway knew what the real thing felt like, and knew when he was no longer able to achieve it, and alcohol couldn't kill the pain, though it helped to kill *him*.

## VII

And if you don't particularly care to travel the routes that I've described?

Well, you need, don't you? to resist the image of a knowing self, the Poet, that is superior to and more comprehensive than the utterances in individual poems. Or is coterminous with the mode of utterance in the best of them. (With the risk, of course, that someone will take the *worst* of them, such as in private letters to friends—alas, poor Larkin! ! —as evidence of what the “mind” of that writer *really* was.)

So it's comforting to learn of the variegated nature, the different modes of discoursing and *being* with different people, of D.H. Lawrence and Samuel Johnson.

Particularly if you'd *like* to be all of a piece yourself, like those one or two genuinely good persons whom you're fortunate to have known (if you have) or like the person-to-person Yvor Winters of his incomparable *Selected Letters*, the importance of which, as of Winters himself, the "traditionalist" editors of the *New Criterion* still don't seem to have grasped.

## VIII

"Hammer your thoughts into unity," Yeats said, though "Fumble your way towards a bit more coherence" might be an apter description for some of us. Or even, try not to let things get *worse*. The career of Pound is hardly an ideal model.

But whether in or out of literature, we live and move and have our being in an ongoing succession of transactions and encounters, each with its own demands. And if one postulates too rigid an ideal self, one can be endlessly disappointed and self-punishing when one fails to live up to it.

Worse still, you can perceive others in that way, and make demands accordingly, and turn against them when they don't live up to your expectations.

Part of the appeal of Zen, as presented in Eugen Herrigel's classic *Zen in the Art of Archery*, is that it's about focusing totally, at this moment, and this, and this, on whatever is the immediate task. You're aiming *this* time, each time a new aiming—in forgetfulness of the previous aimings and of the "self," the irrelevant baggage of concerns, the *watcher*.

It is what you see in sports like baseball and snooker, and in photography. Cartier-Bresson praises Herrigel somewhere.

## IX

As I've said elsewhere, quality cannot flow by osmosis from one work to another, or even from one part of a work to another, let alone do so

across the years. In *East Coker*, Eliot, himself by then one of the peaks in the Himalayas of literary distinction, noted with characteristic gloom how

each venture  
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate  
With shabby equipment always deteriorating  
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,  
Undisciplined squads of emotion.

But things don't have to be quite so bad.

Not when you think of how fresh Yeats remained poetically, up until the end, able to speak in a variety of voices, including the playfulness of "The Statesman's Holiday," the deft defining of the inner mysteriousness of public figures in "Long-Legged Fly," the meditative revisiting of embodied values in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," and the yearning for lost creative powers in "The Circus Animals' Desertion," which is nevertheless itself a moving act of creation.

And what made that possible was Yeats' use of, and sense of freedom with, a broad variety of what I have elsewhere called "languages."

## X

I have talked quite a bit, here and elsewhere, about such languages.

Back in the early Seventies, I wrote,

Let me name some of the works, in various media, in which different languages are used to some degree: in literature, *Ulysses*, *The Faerie Queene*, the *Cantos*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Horse's Mouth*, *Four Quartets*, *Blood Wedding*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, *Paradise Lost*, *Moby-Dick*, *The Death Ship*, *The Winter's Tale*, the Bible; in music, *Sergeant Pepper* and innumerable operas; in cinema, *The Chelsea Girls*, ... almost any ... movie by Godard, ... and all of the numerous movies with dream sequences in them.

In such works we have spectrums, not dichotomies.

I was writing in perfect ignorance of Bakhtin, that great critic who was born in the same year as Leavis, and who had things in common with Leavis.

## XI

What did I myself mean by languages?

Well, in the brilliant closing pages of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus bares in his diary what at the time might have been called his poetic soul:

*April 5.* Wild spring. Scudding clouds. O life! Dark stream of swirling bogwater on which apple-trees have cast down their delicate flowers. Eyes of girls among the leaves. Girls demure and romping. All fair or auburn: no dark ones. They blush better. Houpla!

But is that the “real” Stephen? What about this one?

[*March 20.*] Told me once, in a moment of thoughtlessness, his father was sixty-one when he was born. Can see him. Strong farmer type. Pepper and salt suit. Square feet. Unkempt, grizzled beard. Probably attends coursing matches.

Or this?

*April 15.* Met her today point blank in Grafton Street.... Asked me was I writing poems? About whom? I asked her. This confused her more and I felt sorry and mean. Turned off that valve at once and opened the spiritual-heroic refrigerating apparatus, invented and patented in all countries by Dante Alighieri. Talked rapidly of myself and my plans. In the midst of it unluckily I made a sudden gesture of a revolutionary nature. I must have looked like a fellow throwing a handful of peas into the air.

Or what about this?

[*April 6*] The past is consumed in the present and the present is living only because it brings forth the future.

## XII

No style here is *the* style, no “doing” (defining, exulting, etc) *the* doing, no reality *the* reality.

And just as the reality of that grizzle-bearded farmer is not negated by those eyes of girls among the apple-trees—or vice versa—, so the ironical self-awareness and the multifarious perceptions don’t preclude the commitment to forward-reaching action in the magnificent penultimate entry:

*April 26.* Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.

## XIII

The list of works employing multiple languages could be much extended. As I also wrote,

There are, for example, individual authors, such as Emerson, Nietzsche, and Lawrence, whose work when viewed as a whole is marked by contradictions that can almost certainly only be resolved, or at least made sense of, by looking more carefully at the various languages that they use.

## XIV

This multifariousness frees you from having to choose between the primitive model of everyone looking at the “real” world as if through a window pane—a single solid observed, with observers all observing it in essentially the same way—and the scarcely less primitive model of their all gazing at it in absolutely different ways, with no possibility of communication.

And strains on the writer are eased with respect to what used to be called, a bit quaintly, the writer’s task.

As I also said,



Once again, any language can be used well or ill, and the amount of truth that can be attained to in it will depend on the distinction of the mind using it, as well as on the potentialities of the language itself.

But given distinction of mind, and given distinguished languages, the difference between the relationship of literature and art to reality as I have tried to describe it and as one finds it in the work of someone like Northrop Frye is like that between modern scientific investigation and scientific investigation as it was conceived of in the mid-nineteenth century.

In the latter, the explorer pushes out in a homogeneous and essentially unmysterious universe in which the dignity possible to individual men is oddly diminished.

In the former it is many different kinds of explorations that are made, and the explorations themselves, in so far as they are done intelligently and accurately, help to construct, in a task without foreseeable limits, the human universe that we inhabit.

Deconstructionism arose as a response to the over-structuring in Structuralism.

Resist the homogenizers and systematizers, particularly the constructors of false dichotomies.

Spectrums and Wittgensteinian “family likenesses” are much better conceptual tools.

## XV

One also needs to resist the feeling that poetic selves can become known in a collective knowing that is superior to that of mere individuals—a knowing coterminous, perhaps, with the minds of the brightest persons in that collective. Back in the days of anonymity, the question would be, What did the *TLS*—the journal—have to say about the book? What did *it* think?

(How can anything stupid ever *conceivably* be said about *anything* in the *New York Review of Books*?)

Puzzled about some points of literal meaning in those poems by Rimbaud and Villon that I translated for “Personals,” I caught myself assuming that the answers would by now all be known to “the French,” the collectivity of French critics/scholars/lexicographers. But I wouldn’t have dreamed of feeling in the same way about Anglo-American glossings of “The Windhover.”

Saying things in French doesn’t automatically make you smarter

## XVI

But what *is* this knowledge that you assume, or sense, is known about a writer or a poem? This professionalized, this academic, this special knowledge?

Well, it seems to be, for the most part, knowledge of The Poet, the writer, the person existing chronologically and having certain experiences at certain times, and various thoughts, and writing in certain ways “about” them.

So I dipped into a few discussions of Rimbaud in order to learn what “*promenade*” means in the poem “*Roman*” (“Romance”), since we obviously aren’t at the seaside—discussions in real books, books in French, in the French section of the stacks.

And here was someone telling me confidently what a youth called Arthur was doing and feeling in that particular year, and how he was coping in the poem with problematic feelings about his parents and so forth, the ongoing *real* problems and concerns of his life, just as they are for you and me,—the permanent subtexts, the underground rivers of our fascinating lives, at least in a certain view of the world.

With the lovely particularities of the poem becoming devastated in the process, as if some oaf were stomping around in a gorgeous flower-bed pontificating about “roots.”

## XVII

In my late teens, a North London suburbanite, with very imperfect French, I could *feel* myself there in that poem by that in fact vastly different young man, just as I could feel myself there in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist*.

I knew very little about Rimbaud except that he was a boy genius who had an affair with Verlaine, gave up poetry, went off to Africa, sold guns, and died of gangrene, and I'd read only one or two other poems by him.

So I was able to be out in that space that warm June night and see that young girl trotting along beside her father in her little button boots and the rest of it (even without knowing the exact meanings of all the words), rather than having to enter the vaguer and more general and far less experiential "Rimbaud" constructed by this or that biographer and condensed into the semi-official accounts of standard reference works.

The youthfulness of seventeen is there in the poem, as it is too in Rimbaud's "Au Cabaret Vert." A simple reminder that the "I" of "Au Cabaret Vert" is young is really all you need, if in fact you do need it. *None* of the poems that I've picked for "Personals" requires us to know more about the authors than what's there.

Likewise, all you need to know for *really* reading Villon's great ballade of the hanged, in addition to the literal meanings of individual words and phrases, is that six skeletons (well, bodies in some readings) are dangling from a gibbet.

You don't need to know where the gibbet is, or who the hanged are. You don't need the (limiting) verbal equivalent of contemporary woodcuts.

This is part of what is meant, isn't it, by talk about the "universality" of poems?

It's a loose metaphor, of course. But entering into how a particular voicing goes, word by word, line by line (a poem isn't a picture) is much easier without that other stuff floating around like the junk which Homer Simpson releases in the space capsule whose crew he is temporarily a member of.

## XVIII

Another resistance needed—the feeling that poems when you get right down to it are all members of the same family and can be assimilated or "read" in the same way once you know what poetry really is.

There they all are, on the Norton pages, in their different shapes and sizes, a bit like your fellow customers in a supermarket, some stocky, some tall and willowy, some tiny and cute and hardly there at all.

And you feel you know what they're like and could, if you wanted, get to know more about them just by looking. These are people, those are poems, we're all people, aren't we? Nice enough people, in the nicer part of town, behaving with reasonable civility.

Rimbaud, or Sade, or Genghis Khan would still have to pass through check-out ("Have a good day") without *too* many displays of individuality.

There could be a cartoon to that effect. Probably it's been done.

## XIX

But of course those lives, those individual experiencing selves, temporarily diminished to their supermarket roles, *aren't* there for us, as Philip Larkin beautifully recalls in "The Whitsun Weddings."

As the narrator's train to London stops at station after station, the generic platform noises become, when he starts to look, clusters of wedding parties.

And within the slightly tacky clothing ("the perms/The nylon gloves and jewelry-substitutes") lie the deeper feelings of women at such historic rituals.

And within it all are the private mysterious experiencings of the just-married young, on their honeymoon way, and with who knows what futures ahead of them.

Parents describe in print how a general idea (we all know kids grow up and leave home) has become different and unfamiliar, has become *strange*, in the particularities of their own experiences.

What a wealth of misery can lurk within casual media references to nine people killed and eighty-seven "injured" in a train wreck.

So too with the particularities of poems, or at least good ones, or *some* good ones.

## XX

If we're talking critically, we're much better off uncoupling value from terms like "poem," "poet" "poetry", just as we do, when we stop to think about it, with the connotations of everyday words. A "Texan," as we know when we want to, can look like Woody Allen and be a Catholic theologian. There are all manner of "fathers" and "mothers," biological and otherwise, some of them monsters.

Would-be essentializing statements about poetry ("Poetry *is*...") are no more likely to be true than similar statements about fathers or Texans, at least when value is being attributed or denied.

Part of the anxiety still generated about "art" comes from the assumption that if it's art it's *good* and people must be taught how to admire it. So that when transgressive products elbow their way into the museum and claim citizenship in the Good Kingdom, they're simply not our kind of people, dear.

Personally, I think that when you've discovered profundity in the paintings of Philip Guston in his Ab Ex years, you've already sold the pass and can't logically complain when an Andres Serrano (in fact a powerful photographer) comes along.

"It's in verse. So it's a poem. But it's not a *good* poem."

Why should that be so curiously difficult to say?

## XXI

A colleague, Rowland Smith, once pointed out to me that part of the problem for Anglophone readers with French literary-critical-theorizing in translation is that French nouns normally have particles preceding them. You don't just like bread, you like *the* bread. You don't seek truth, or truths, you seek THE Truth.

As if there were essential *things* there.

But if THE Truth, the definite, shareable, undisputable true nature of anything, or, worse, everything is a phantom (not even a mirage, which at least is a reflection of *something*), you can still have particular truths, or at least would-be truth-telling.

You can still tell someone about a party that they missed, and say, no, they heard wrong, the quarrel *didn't* happen that way, and he didn't snatch the glass away from her, and she *wasn't* crying.

Statements can be *untrue*.

And we know what it's like to read an account of doings by individuals about whom we know nothing, and we think, yes, that feels right, that's how it *would* be, under those circumstances.

## XXII

But does this mean that every account, with a show of plausibility to it (particularly when provided by A Poet) has to be accepted on, as they say, its own terms?

The Belgian critic Georges Poulet said that

When I read as I ought—that is without mental reservation, without any desire to preserve my independence of judgment, and with the total commitment required of any reader—my comprehension becomes intuitive and any feeling proposed to me is immediately assumed by me.

Must we take that “ought” to mean that we must always read in that fashion?

Obviously not. To say so would imprison us inside a magic circle called “art” and require us to read in a way clean contrary to all our other dealings with discourse.

Reading *matters*. It can have real-world consequences.

Reading a work like Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*, that patchwork assembled after his death, with its addresses to the self and others, its shifting modes, its returns to the attack from different directions is a bit like reading a play like *King Lear* or *Anthony and Cleopatra* on your own for the first time when you're young and don't know the plot.

You're shooting the rapids, you're hanging on, you don't know where you'll be ending up. You *cannot* read it as Poulet demands. Particularly

if you're aware of the political uses made of Nietzsche by horrible people.

Nor should you.

### XXIII

And there are widely varying degrees of quality inside and among Nietzsche's other works—between, say, the brilliant incisiveness of *Beyond Good and Evil*, the pseudo-poetic fustian of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and the autobiographical bragging of *Ecce Homo*.

The gulfs between the good and the bad parts of a writer like D.H. Lawrence, using so broad a diversity of languages, or Coleridge in his poetry, or Poe in his fiction, is almost enough to make you borrow from the critics in Borges' imagined country Tlön and postulate several different writers at work under each name.

The same authorial name is attached to "The Windhover" and to a poem about a sailor who's fallen overboard in which,

Him, after an hour of wintry waves,  
A schooner sights, with another, and saves,  
And he boards her in Oh! such joy  
He has lost count what came next, poor boy.

And Hopkins wasn't *trying* to be funny.

### XXIV

So obviously Poulet's statement is absurd if taken literally. It would compel you (and what would the "you" be?) to lose yourself in an infinite variety of voicings, and accept each in its own terms *morally* as well.

C.S. Lewis tried the same move in *An Experiment in Criticism* when he elevated "receiving" works over "using" them. By which he meant, of course, that he wanted you to accept on their own terms the works that he himself enjoyed and approved of, such as *The Faerie Queen*. I doubt that he'd have made the same claim on behalf of *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* or *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS*.

In “Wordsworth in the Tropics,” Aldous Huxley pointed out the comfortably narrowed limits of the Romantics’ “Nature.”

It’s a bit like that with some of the celebrations of “Literature” and “Art” and, insofar as it isn’t purely technical, “Philosophy.”

“Literature,” using the term neutrally, is a zone of *energies*.

It’s easy to forget, nowadays, the shocks of the Elizabethan/Jacobean “Theatre of Cruelty”—Marlowe, Shakespeare, Webster, et al—, the Gothic darkneses (epitomized in those châteaux of Sade), the prodigious energies of Balzac and Dickens and Dostoevsky when experienced raw, the swirling zones of the mind in Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror*, the vertiginously swift linguistic moves in some of the poems of Mallarmé and Rimbaud.

And out beyond Dostoevsky exploring the psychology of murderous compulsions (going on from Poe’s “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-tale Heart”) lie the horrifying pages of Hubert Selby Jr.’s *The Room*, and beyond those, the even more horrifying pages of the fourth issue of Jim and Debbie Goad’s ‘zine *Answer Me*.

And in the opposite direction, you have the cool deflationary nihilism of Borges’ imagined man of letters Pierre Menard, dedicated (according to his fictive eulogist) to the absurdist task, from which almost nothing resulted, of writing a *Don Quixote* that would be word for word the same as Cervantes’ novel of that name, but a *different* and greater work.

There are zones of literature and art—fiction, images, “writing”—where, if you fully *give* yourself to the experience you can be seduced, corrupted, depleted, coarsened, benumbed. And where the most insidious corruption can be that of the ironical aesthete or the pseudo-objective analyzer.

## XXV

Nor can you be sure in advance where “quality” is to be found

Here is a passage from a twentieth-century British novel:

She went on past the café and the jam of parked trucks. Beyond a field, the railway ran parallel with the road for some way. The



track was on a steep embankment and beyond it was a wooded slope. At distances there were bricked arches cut through the embankment far enough past the café for none of the guys arriving or leaving the trucks to notice her. The arches had concrete gullies to carry away the water from the wooded slopes. She went through the arch and climbed up to the trees. She found a flat patch big enough to lie on, spread it with all the brush she could find making a springy pad. Then she came back and crossed the field straight to where a big advertisement hoarding stood at the road edge. That would let her find her way across to the same spot in the dark. She went back to the café.

The passage comes, in fact, from the 1950 edition of Darcy Glinto's *Road Floozie*, the 1941 edition of which, along with Glinto's *Lady—Don't Turn Over* (1940) landed the author and publisher in the dock in the Old Bailey in 1942, where they were heavily fined. *Road Floozie* and *Lady—Don't*, a more erotic paperback rewrite of James Hadley Chase's kidnap novel *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (savaged by George Orwell), were withdrawn from circulation. Glinto [Harold Ernest Kelly] was clearly a writer beyond the protective pale of "literature."

## XXVI

But that passage gave me a thrill when I first read it in the Seventies. and it still does. It has the kind of concreteness that I was talking about in "Powers of Style." It opens up a space in which you (well, I) can momentarily live and breathe. It makes me want to say, instinctively, That's art!

And part of what is involved seems to me this.

The writer, his mind's eye on the scene in front of him, is giving much more than what would be needed to simply get her settled later on for the night. The purchasers of scruffy paperbacks in the Soho area were not seeking "art" in a book described on the cover of the 1950 edition as "A burning exposure of the moral background to long-haul trucking in America."

The writer is feeling his way forward with her. He is feeling and seeing *with* her in her problem-solving. He is *enjoying* the act of writing. And so he is throughout her odd, alienated, but simpatico peregrinations,

without the programmatic *noir* bleakness of actual American writers like James M. Cain.

Nor, despite the Crown's disapproval, is the book conventionally violent or obscene.

Predating Camus' *L'Etranger*, it is a sort of existentialist-novel-before-the-fact. But the French, who loved James Hadley Chase, never picked up on it, so far as I know.

## XXVII

So I would say that here too we have what I was talking about in "Powers of Style."

You start sensing at the outset what kind of thing it is that you are being offered, the "language," the operative conventions (Winters' term), the figurative contract with the reader.

And then, as I said apropos of "forkings," you start registering departures from the implicit norm, the implicit minimal rules of the game that would have enabled the author, like a writer of verses for Hallmark greeting cards, to create an acceptable, a printable, a money-earning work.

Such departures may be *bad*, like forced rhymes and cliché syntactical distortions in order to get the obligatory metre. Glinto's attempts at American underworld speech and proper names, back in the early Forties, are sometimes ludicrous.

But the departures can also be good. And Glinto's *Deep South Slave* ("First Printed in Great Britain 1951," according to the second page) is so good, both in itself and in its rendering of the American South, as to make me wonder whether Kelly and his brother Hector simply pirated it for their Robin Hood Press

But if so, where did it come from, —a non-exploitational and knowledgeable-seeming novel about racial injustice in the 1930s? The desire to solve that mystery would take me down a lot of interesting by-ways ("Found Pages" on my site) that I had never foreseen. The mystery remains a mystery, though.

## XXVIII

As I said at the outset of “Powers of Style,” the *real* question about any work is not, is it major or is it minor, but is it *good*. And goodness transcends categories.

I imagine that Winters experienced the kind of *frisson* that I myself felt with the *Road Floozie* passage, but much more intensely, when in one of Wordsworth’s *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* he came upon the reference, apropos of the concept of mutability, to

the tower sublime  
Of yesterday, which royally did wear  
Her crown of weeds, but could not even sustain  
Some casual shout that broke the silent air,  
Or the unimaginable touch of time.

I don’t know whether the last two-and-a-half lines are, as Winters says, the best in Wordsworth. I wouldn’t want to have to read all the others in order to find out. But it seems to me quite likely.

Into them flood what feel for me like the light and air of the Roman *campagna* (towers in Britain tend not to be free-standing). You can *hear* that shout piercing the quiet air, perhaps in the early morning before the birds and insects are out. You can see the sudden crumbling fall of the tower, irregular in outline, with vegetation sprouting from it.

An “image.”

As Winters says, in a sentence that is itself poetry, “These lines make us realize the true nature of dissolution, or an aspect of the true nature, as that which works continuously and so subtly as to be imperceptible until the indeterminable moment when the object can no longer sustain its own weight.”

## XXIX

When Leavis speaks of how “words in poetry invite us, not to ‘think about’ and ‘judge but to ‘feel into’ or ‘become’—to realize a complex experience that is given in the words,” the statement and the major essay in which it occurs, “Literary Criticism and Philosophy,” points us usefully forward.

It's defective if taken literally, since it presumes that you already know that what you're reading is a poem and innately different from more abstract discourse (or, I suppose, from "mere verse").

But Leavis' own critical practice makes clear that it's an *invitation*, and that you don't have to choose between an absolute assimilation—the kind that helps get you A's as a student—or a supposedly neutral and "objective" dissecting.

The committed reading is what you are *trying* to do. It's an expansion of your own being, an entering into experiences that you may not yet have had, or into ways of coping better with ones you've had.

But in fact the entry may not be possible, there may be off-putting things in the first few lines (you're not going into *that* 42nd Street movie theatre after looking at the stills), or blips and collapsings along the way (though maybe you should persist and see if things pick up again).

### XXX

And it's that kind of reaching forward, with an initially suspended judgment, and a measure of hopefulness, that we see in the criticism of Leavis and Winters and various others.

As Leavis said, you're not working with a yardstick and seeing if the work measures up. It isn't something apart from you, like a physical object.

You are *reading*, a term that has been a good deal "problematized," in part because earlier the guardians of culture couldn't see any difficulty with the term and wouldn't take Leavis seriously.

Reading was reading, something you just *did*, like eating. It was what you could write a *précis* of after you'd finished.

Not that you'd eat a bowl of mush at eight months or a gourmet dinner at age forty in the same way.

### XXXI

But how, then, to "read" poems? How about some examples?

Well, since I've kept mentioning them, how about, oh, Leavis' essay "Gerard Manley Hopkins" in *The Common Pursuit* (one of his finest) or Winters on what he calls post-symbolist poetry in *Forms of Discovery*?

For that matter, I guess I've been doing some "reading" myself in this book.

It's not a question of some particular grand method, like that formalized *explication de texte* that used to be (is it still?) taught in French classrooms and which could take you methodically through a number of aspects of a poem,

And which wasn't necessarily all misguided either (Paul Pieltain is excellent on Valéry's *Le Cimetière Marin*), in contrast to its American equivalent, still—incredibly—showing up in 1990s questions for the Graduate Record Exam, in which a poem becomes essentially a proposition developed as if by an orator, with a consistent tone, appropriate would-be persuasive details, and the possibility of right/wrong multiple choice questions about it ("This line is an example of (a) dramatic irony, (b) moral self-condemnation, (c) oedipal resentment....")

The Harvard School of Poetic Exposition, as it were

Talk about time-lags! When I came upon those papers, it was like finding a psychiatrist still practicing phrenology. No wonder Derrida & Co. were hailed as liberators.

There is no particular transmittable method in Leavis and Winters whereby at the end of the operation the flesh of the lobster is on one plate (or inside you) and the shells are on another.

They have written no would-be-complete analyses of individual poems.

They have simply quoted a lot and commented on particular passages, at times merely a line or two.

## XXXII

But they show how you can pass between the Scylla and Charybdis of, on the one hand, literature as revelations of states of the unique

individual soul—its “feelings,” its movements, its spiritual insights—and, on the other, the smooth public orderings of well-made rhetoric.

And between speaking about literature with *faux*-objectivity, in the spirit of that still not wholly dead command to the writers of high-school paper, “Don’t say ‘I,’” and offering merely “personal” and subjective impressions.

### XXXIII

When Winters, and Leavis, and Pound, from whom they both learned, range across poems from several centuries, without any inhibiting sense of straying outside their areas of competence, something important is going on.

We are not looking “back” with them at radiant or darkening landscapes of the mind, with all kinds of special pleadings on the grounds that such-and-such was “of” this or that period.

We are in the permanent literary present that we enter when we talk in the present tense about what a writer “says,” or what a character “thinks,” or how a poem “ends.”

To use the standard technical terms, it is a synchronic rather than a diachronic approach—but without some hypothesized style of the chronological present as the base against which all other poems are judged.

On the contrary, what is at issue is in part what the poems being written *now* should be like.

It is also what used to be called an existential approach. Each work that you read is *there*, neither automatically inferior or superior to you because of its age, and inviting you to appropriate and inhabit it—and, of course, to like or love or applaud it.

Good introductory textbooks, such as Bergmann and Epstein’s *Heath Guide to Poetry*, are like that.

## XXXIV

But how do you cope with the abundance and diversity of texts? If you try appropriating everything you will, as I've said, go crazy. Or else you remain detached and it all becomes superficial.

So you "read," and that reading is, or at least *ought* to be, word by word, and line by line, since words follow one another in sequence.

And it is an evaluative reading, but not in the sense that you begin with an abstract model of what a poem must be, and then flip through a mixed heap of them on a stall, picking one here, discarding one there, and putting another aside for further examination, and so forth.

Rather, it is a mode or modes of attention, a kind of expectancy and alertness, that is similar whether you are a reader or a writer of poetry, or both together, and in which you are indeed partly judging the poem in its own terms, meaning the expectancies it arouses at the outset, and the conventions, the game-rules, that it appears to be observing.

Those conventions may be much more subtle than simply that this is a satire, or a love poem, or a sixteenth-century-Petrarchan love-poem, and so forth.

As if those categories and conventions had a pre-existing and *compelling* objective existence, rather than being extrapolations and averagings from a number, perhaps a large number, of particular poems.

## XXXV

Pound says in *ABC of Reading*, "I believe the ideal teacher would approach any masterpiece, that he was presenting to his class, almost as if he had never seen it before."

In a way, you want to read as if you hadn't read this particular work before, but remember all the others that you've read. So that you can have again that shock of recognition that comes with a sense of difference, perhaps uniqueness.

Artie Shaw said of Bix Beiderbecke that he made a new sound. There can be something of that in the first line of a poem, just as there can in

the first shot of a movie. You prick up your ears or open your eyes slightly. There's a touch of strangeness there, a hint of promise.

You get it when April, at the start of *The Waste Land* isn't a-coming in, or a bit late this year, or doing/ not doing its seasonal duties, it's the *cruellest* month (with explanation following).

You get it when "They flee from...*me*," which is to say that we don't have quite the kind of identifiable "they" here that we'd have in formulations like "They flee the angels' flaming swords" or "They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead."

You get it with "*That* is no country for," and "While my *hair*," and "Complacencies of the *peignoir*," and so on

A tingle. A *frisson*. A promise. And you start riding the wave in the hope that it will carry you through unfalteringly to a closure.

### XXXVI

And if you find that you care about formal features, not as identifiers (this is a Petrarchan sonnet so it will be *weighty* if that's what the poet wants) or as authenticators (the poet is a paid-up member of the guild), but as themselves part of the expressiveness of the poem, organizers of the ongoing modes of being in it, you will be attending to those too, without necessarily verbalizing your reactions.

And you will be hoping, each time that a poem starts promisingly, that the poet will have been able to keep it up until the end.

And the modes of being will involve thought and judgment to varying extents, ranging from *weighty* and explicitly philosophical or religious poems to the kind of poem so light and deft that there is little there but the delicate adjustment of tone to subject.

And as various poems accumulate for you as belonging in some way together, even when on the surface it looks as if they shouldn't, you can be drawn towards a more general positioning of yourself in the world—if, that is to say, the poems that you admire and would like to have written yourself, and which can affect such poems as you do in fact write (if you write poems). have been appropriated and not simply "studied" as if they were objects essentially separate from yourself. (But what would that "self" *be*?).



And philosophical and/or moral and/or political questions may indeed be involved too, at least if you believe that what is *said* in poems, meaning said or conveyed in individual sentences or in details of phrasing (for an adjective or adverb can *say* something, at times something major), really matters.

In what used to be a famous passage in “Literary Criticism and Philosophy,” Leavis speaks of how the, for him, serious critic asks himself,

What, on testing and re-testing and wider experience, turn out to be my more constant preferences, what the relative permanencies in my response, and what structure begins to assert itself in the field of poetry with which I am familiar? What map or chart of English poetry as a whole represents my utmost consistency and most inclusive coherence of response?

### XXXVII

So, it is some of those things that have been involved in my own reading of poems and thinking about poetry over the years, and which I’ve talked about in *A Bit of*.

But I didn’t begin with everything tidily worked out in my head, and then proceed to present it with due lecture-room clarity, the kind that enables students to make serviceable notes if they want to.

I don’t have that kind of mind. I am in sympathy with the old lady described by E.M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* who enquired what logic was and, when told that it was a way of organizing your thoughts so that you could express them clearly, said plaintively, “But how can I know what I think till I see what I say?”

I was working things out as I went along, as I usually do.

It can be a help to have, as I do, a lousy verbal memory. It really does mean that you reread poems somewhat as if for the first time.

### XXXVIII

One thing I do know is that *voicing* a poem—experiencing it ongoing in time, as a sequence in which every syllable is sounded, whether aloud or in the mind’s ear—is very important.

This need not be a solitary activity. Discussions with others about emphases and meaning (“I never *gave* him any money”? “I never gave him *any* money?”) can be helpful. Anything that truly helps to get the poem more *there* for you is good, as I found when struggling with the French translations and going to dictionaries and to translations and glossings by others.

### XXXIX

Some acquaintance with metrics can also help, not as a set of rules with points off for breaking them, but as a way of seeing more exactly what’s there, just as being able to read music can enhance its appreciation.

But once the tape’s running and the clock’s ticking, no-one else can do it for you, and it’s only you who are voicing the poem, a single “you,” not one self doing the reading and another observing, any more than during a rally in tennis or any other activity where you’re fully *there* during those moments.

And part of the blessedness of such moments or stretches of focused attending is that they’re an escape from the curse of *self*-consciousness, or from a formless semi-consciousness.

However, what you are likely to find initially (unless you’re a natural, as some people indeed are) is a large gap between how the poem sounds, as you hear it in your mind’s ear as your eye glides along the lines, and how it sounds on the tape, which is likely to be HORRIBLE.

So you have to go back again, and study the poem, and *give* yourself to it, like an actor entering into a part and making it his/her own, so that he/she can *be* that character at that moment when voicing or revealing those particular attitudes.

(Imagine the labour required of an actor these days to shake “To be or not to be” loose of all the voicings of it by others that he may have heard.)

## XL

Going further and trying to memorize a poem can be a bit like trying to write one.

Some parts become clear and memorable early, just as some lines did for Yeats ( on the evidence of manuscript versions) in successive drafts of poems like “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Leda and the Swan,” where they are constants. Others refuse to come clear at first, so that there are lacunae where you know that something lies ahead but you’re not sure how you get there, how one part *leads* to another.

And in doing all this, you are likely to find yourself getting into odd spaces of the mind, almost physical, but not in the familiar perspectival way, just as you do in the dentist’s chair when with your eyes shut you experience the cavernous space inside with its unlocated pressures and vibrations and occasional pains, a unchartable, non-visual space.

I tried to catch something of the nature of such poetic spaces in “Among the Monuments.”

## XLI

You may also, of course, when compelled to think about the soundness of this or that generalization, or of the whole attitude in the poem, find that you *can't* go on, that you don't *want* to internalize this particular utterance.

You are forced into finding whether you can *really* make such-and-such a generalization in the poem with conviction on its own terms, and not as part of the hypothesized “character” of the author (the kind that scholar-specialists hypothesize when they tell you defensively, “Well, you have to understand about her *mother*.” ).

I mean, why should a dumb statement be permitted a standing in verse, at least when treated seriously, that it wouldn't have outside it? Contrariwise, some other generalization may acquire an increasing weight for you.

In Winters' criticism, there's an important distinction between making a rational statement (in the form of a generalization) and making a rationally defensible utterance, the kind you could defend if asked to.

All this is part of the process of growth and learning and change. And it has real-world implications.

## XLII

It's always a thrill making scandalous pronouncements that go clean against what common sense appears to tell us—academic-intellectual equivalents of Dada-type reclassificatory moves in art, whereby some hitherto non-art activity, such as cutting your finger nails, gets metamorphosed into art.

The claim that everything is a “text” is one of those flesh-creepers that can make you feel momentarily as if the cloud-capped-towers, the gorgeous palaces, and all the aspirations and agonies embodied in them, are dwindling down to the black-on-white of page-print and can be closed up and put away in the stacks.

But when a death warrant, a seed catalogue, *The Communist Manifesto*, *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, and the limerick about the young man from Madras (“Who was having a boy in the grass”) are all equally texts, just as all those supermarket shoppers are people, you pretty well have to start over again and explore each individual text to see what's going on in it, rather than assume that you already know it because of the socio-political pigeonhole you've put it in.

## XLIII

The statement that there's no *hors-de-texte* need not imply, as happens when it's misleadingly translated as “There is nothing outside *the* text,” that there's nothing physical out there,

It's more like saying, unexceptionably, that there's no *au-dessus-de-la-melée*, meaning no entirely disinterested position above this or that “struggle” that you're involved in.

There's nothing difficult, for most of us at least, with the idea that all texts are created *in part* because of encounters—near, distant, vivid, murky, forgotten, whatever—, with other texts.

Which doesn't in the least entail their being created *only* out of materials and strategies in those other texts.

To know what to do with “promenade” in Rimbaud’s “Romance”, you need to be able to have some idea in your mind’s eye of where, in or near a French town back then, respectable people could be out strolling at night under the presumably planted lime-trees.

And I still don’t know *exactly* what those *tartines* would look like that the girl brings on a coloured platter in his “Au Cabaret Vert.” They sound as if they might be open-face sandwiches. But were there *baguettes* back then, or would the loaf have been round? I opted for “slabs,” since those large round loaves didn’t invite daintiness.

#### XLIV

So I feel easier in my own mind about no longer being bothered by assertions about the “death of the author,” if by “the author” is intended some “mind” above or beyond the texts themselves. Which isn’t at all to deny the existence of ongoing mental activities that can’t be directly accessed.

I have no problem accepting that by “Yeats” or “Eliot,” we mean all those letters, essays, poems, and so forth, not all uniform, not all of them wise, nice, or anything else, any more than we ourselves always are.

Plus *believable* reports by others of what was said in conversations—Boswell’s Johnson, Brassai’s Picasso, Kraft’s Stravinsky, and so on, the believability itself a matter of critical judgment, unless a tape-recorder was running at the time. (It’s amazing how nominally respectable biographers and historians these days still give us, without explanation, what purport to be the exact words of conversations where no record was being kept.)

And reading those texts in the way I’ve been talking about, which I suppose could be described as simultaneously phenomenological and formal, is also a means of reconstituting this or that particular “author,” so that we can indeed legitimately speak of individual names and doings, and see *thinking* going on, at times, from poem to poem.

But it is the thinking *there*, the achieved formulating in this particular work or part of a work— an affair of much more than merely “stating,” let alone of unconsciously “revealing”—that we value, and

which can extend into other situations, and help us with our own thinking and being.

## XLV

That way, it becomes harder to talk glibly what this or that writer “believed,” or “thought,” as distinct from what goes on in this or that text (exploring, defining, attacking, arguing, etc).

And to ignore legitimate questions of context—In what form was it said? Where? At what age? Under what circumstances? In what kind of relationship?

And to play the gotcha game whereby, having accepted uncritically, and with too little examination of the works themselves, a generalized image of a writer—usually a benign image—you then presume to have uncovered, again on the basis of too little evidence, mostly biographical, what the writer was *really* like, with a resultant undermining of whatever is there in the works themselves.

As if Larkin, that most lovingly focused of jazz critics, was “really” a racist. Or for that matter, as if T.S. Eliot, before the biographical scrutinizing of *him* began, had really been Mister Wisdom.

It also becomes harder for individuals and individuality to be collapsed into the typologies of psychologists, social scientists, and power-hungry politicians, or to be deconstructed by intellectual terrorists who talk about the Death of the Author.

Do they also talk about the Death of the Composer, I wonder?

# Lagniappe

## Definition

“Lagniappe, lagnappe (lan-yap, lan’yap) [Creole] [Dial], a small present given to a customer with a purchase.”

*Webster’s New World Dictionary*

## Symbolizing

The proposition that something in a work “symbolizes” something else should be the start of a discussion, not a terminus. As Leavis kept insisting, what matters is your experience of a work as you make your way through it. Experiencing a “symbolizing” may not be a simple matter.

## Mysteries and muddles

“‘I like mysteries but I rather dislike muddles,’ said Mrs. Moore.”

E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*

## Idealizing

“Let us get rid of a prejudice here: idealizing does not consist, as is commonly held, in subtracting or discounting the petty and inconsequential. What is decisive is rather a tremendous drive to bring out the main features so that the others disappear in the process.

Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

## Work

Someone has remarked that it can be just as much work being a minor writer as a major one.

## **Melodrama**

The closures in some explorings are like those in the melodramas—science-fiction, thrillers, horror stories—that flicker in and out of Kafka’s fiction and crystallize in Borges’, and which accord with André Breton’s dictum, “The marvellous is always beautiful, anything marvellous is beautiful, in fact only the marvellous is beautiful.”

In the best melodrama, satisfactory solutions are arrived at to certain problems, the hero’s or heroine’s knowledge, real knowledge, has increased along the way, and there are no intimations that anything is undiscoverable for supernatural reasons.

But neither is there a draining away of the marvellous and a replacement of chiaroscuro by the shadowless bleak light of the supermarket. Any more than there is in Shakespeare.

## **Classics**

“A classic is classic not because it conforms to certain structural rules, or fits certain definitions (of which its author had quite probably never heard). It is classic because of a certain eternal and irrepressible freshness.”

Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*

## **Truth and truths**

In an article elsewhere, “Stretches and Languages”, I said that the difference between a would-be totalized world and the multifarious one peopled by Plato, the Kabbalists, Wittgenstein, Shakespeare, Emily Bas-Thornton (in Richard Hughes’ marvellous novel about childhood and learning, *A High Wind in Jamaica*), and the rest of us is

like that between modern scientific investigation and scientific investigation as it was conceived of in the mid-nineteenth century. In the latter, the explorer pushes out into a homogeneous and essentially unmysterious universe in which the dignity possible to individual men is oddly diminished. In the former it is many different kinds of explorations that are made, and the explorations themselves, in so far as they are done intelligently and accurately,



help to construct, in a task without foreseeable limits, the human universe that we inhabit.

Henry James was able to keep going so magnificently from novel to novel and story to story, and avoid the painful creative deterioration of writers like Hawthorne, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald, or the virtual collapse of Melville after *Pierre*, because he was an explorer in that fashion.

He was concerned with truths, not with *the* truth, the kind that could be encapsulated in a single work and that left you thereafter with essentially nothing to say.

And the void that he scrutinizes to such terrifying effect in “The Beast in the Jungle” is the void of perversely foregone opportunities—of a refusal to “live,” to choose, and to continue living and choosing amid the ongoing forkings that each act of choice and commitment opens up.

### **Compactness**

“I would say that today the rule of ‘Keep It Short’ is confirmed even by long novels, the structure of which is accumulative, modular, and combinatorial.”

Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*

Meaning, I take it, that good ones consist of a succession of shaped and individuated chapters and aren’t just salamis cut into chunks.

My own favourite novel: *The Great Gatsby*.

### **Speech and signification**

It strikes me, rather late in the day, that when Winters speaks of *appropriate* emotion in a poem, he is talking about what I.A. Richards and Leavis (both of them likewise engaged in slowing-down reading and making texts more aural) meant by “tone” and, in Richards’ case, “attitude,” the difference being that Winters went much further into the shadings that are possible through definable metrical effects.

A whole variety of attitudes can be conveyed through the tone in which the two words, “Oh really” are spoken, and those tones come

about through definable effects of varying pitch, duration, speed, and so forth—in a word, rhythms—that can, in part, be described in metrical terms.

De Man, so far as I can tell from his writings, simply had a tin ear when it came to speech rhythms, and consequently made needlessly heavy weather of the supposed indeterminacy of meaning. The particular meaning of a relatively general word or phrase is usually perfectly clear from the speech-stressing it receives, the signifier not having become fully a sign before that stressing.

In a famous example, de Man makes play with the supposed impossibility of determining which of two possible meanings to give to a question by Archie Bunker, “What’s the difference?” In fact, depending on which meaning was intended, the words would have been spoken differently.

And it won’t do to say that the written word is the *real* word.

It isn’t, and not because the spoken word somehow points in an unmediated way to external or interior realities, but because of those extra, or at least more abundant, linguistic resources.

But there are things that are easier to do with the written word.

It is easier to lie in writing, at least for those of us whose tones of voice and facial expressions may convey what we were trying to conceal. In that respect, you could describe a game of poker among experienced players as a reading of “texts.”

Part of the academic Deconstructive enterprise consisted in artificially creating difficulties and then, to the sound of trumpets, pointing triumphantly to the fact that the difficulties existed.

### **No-no’s**

Apparently some North American high-school teachers of English still tell their students not to use “I” when they write—a nice, clear, moralistic rule which wrecks their students’ prose. Imagine going through Orwell’s essays and striking out all the “I’s”!

If I myself were stronger willed, I would never use “very,” with its propensity to make a vagueness seem fuller by intensifying it. “I am

very pleased,” rather than, “I am thrilled/ delighted/ overjoyed,” as the case may be. I suspect that “very” is rare in good poetry.

More to the point would be not using “the” and its cognates, as in “the poet” or “the scientist.” Liking the thrust of the following passage, I was going to quote it and simply add, “So is the poet.”

A novel examines not reality but existence. And existence is not what has occurred, existence is the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he’s capable of. Novelists draw up the map of existence by discovering this or that human possibility.... The novelist is neither historian nor prophet: he is an explorer of existence (Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*)

Then I started wondering what on earth it meant to talk about “the” poet, as if being “a poet” (a.k.a. writing poems?) were a single thing.

I suppose what’s intended in the quotation is a *good* novelist, meaning someone who writes good novels. Or is it just all writers of novels? And if so, are Harlequin Romances novels, and if not, why not?

Or maybe there’s an implicit reverse definition here—“A writer of fiction who examines not reality but existence is what I mean by ‘a novelist’.”

No, too many questions seem begged here, so let’s not have “THE poet.”

## **Greek and the Book of Nature**

Did the metaphor of Nature (a.k.a. the Universe) as a “language” to be “read” and decoded derive in part from the German Romantics’ experience of Greek in high school.

Ancient Greek (you, the student, was aware) was a finite system, no longer evolving (unlike Latin), and not different from place to place or individual to individual. It was mysterious and intimidating, like those texts (passages from works) that you were being required to translate upon pain of punishment if you got something wrong. It was also exciting at times when you suddenly got, or thought you got, something *right*.

For you *knew* (or were given to understand) that each word, each line, each syntactical connecting, each of those half-glimpsed meanings and surreal juxtaposings in your own mistranslatings as you laboured at your desk) had a *right* meaning that you could discover if only you had the right kind of mind, and which your teachers (swishing their figurative or actual birch rods) already knew, or which someone whom they knew about, some text-glossing super-scholar, knew or was labouring at discovering.

Fascinated as he was, in his own rational and utterly un-Beckettian way, by the non-rational aspects of rational order-seeking, Borges could have written a nice story about all this.

## **Staves**

It takes a wrench of the mind, when talk about the alleged differences between poetry and prose occurs, to remember that a poem, as a sequence of speakable words, no more exists in space than a piece of music exists as rows of staves.

The fourth definition of “stave” in my dictionary, I have just noticed, is, “a set of verses, or lines, of a poem or song; stanza.”

Line-endings, stanza divisions, acting partly as stronger aural punctuation. But also enabling you to glimpse ahead the general patterning.

Which is much harder, perhaps impossible, to do with the German originals in Angel Flores’ *An Anthology of German Poetry* where, in the necessary interests of space-saving, they are printed below the verse translations as continuums, with vertical strokes marking the line-endings.

Could passages of prose be printed in that fashion and then, for ease of reading, be transposed into verse, where we could see where the principal pauses came? In principle, that is. If not, why not?

## **Specifics**

Years ago, after listening to a brutally dismissive review on the national radio of a magnificent ten-year retrospective of Carol Hoorn Fraser’s art, I said in a letter to the programme director:

The show was a remarkably varied one.

It contained lyrical Turner-esque seascapes in colored inks, loose preliminary sketches for paintings, realistic figure studies, detailed surrealist drawings, and oils of various sizes.

It included playful works, protest works (against war, wastage, dehumanization), lyrical celebrations of the mysteries of the body, complex studies in psychological relationships.

Its images ranged from stylized figures in basically realistic situations (e.g., stretcher-bearers among Vietnam trees), through realistic objects incongruously juxtaposed (e.g. plants growing in an automobile), to complexly abstracted figures interconnected with each other and with their environment.

Some of the works were treated two-dimensionally, others involved complicated spatial recessions and interweavings. The degree of finish ran the gamut from a Turner-esque looseness and airiness to an almost metallic hardness.

None of these features came across in Ms. [X]'s account.

When she rattled off her lists of things and themes in the works ("entrails, veins, vines, ... phallic symbols, ... garbage, ... death, decay, old age ..."), it was like someone rattling off a list of "things" in a poet's work ("horses, houses, lakes, isles, Irishmen, sex, politics") in so general a fashion that, for all the hearers could tell, the poems might be all sonnets or all long pieces of blank verse.

Ms. [X] referred specifically to only a single work out of the over seventy in the show, and then in an extremely general way. And she named not a single other artist for purposes of comparison and contrast, not even when using a term as broad as "surrealism."

It's possible to do what passes as literary criticism like that, particularly when a teacher with strong political convictions has a captive audience.

## **Imagining**

In *Artificial Paradises*, Baudelaire talks about man's "predilection for any substances, however dangerous, that might personally exalt him and thus for a moment evoke for him that adventitious paradise upon which all his desires are fixed." And about how those substances weaken our wills by fixating us on the dream of being free from pain among enchanting vistas.

But you have to be careful what you throw out.

Willing, *good* willing, is partly an affair of practical desiring.

In one of the Modesty Blaise thrillers, Modesty or Willy explains that imagination (the everyday kind) trumps will. If you fall overboard five miles from shore, but have in your mind's eye an image of yourself eventually crawling out of the water onto the sand, you will have some chance of reaching shore, whereas if you simply try to drive yourself forward, you will soon tire and go under.

So there's also the need for non-delusory imaginings of plenitude, imaginings of ongoing patterns of *action* by centered selves, or modes of thought from which actions can issue, whether embodied in art, or architecture, or ritual, or festivities, or conventional religious belief, or all of them together.

You do indeed need Beyonds, but they must be, some of them at least, the beyonds of desirable futures that you have some chance of reaching by your own focussed actions.

I suspect that you would have trouble finding among the fictive heroes of British high Romanticism any what might be called effective real-world consciousnesses.

## **Knowledge**

A useful paradigm about knowledge is provided by Geoffrey Household's Conradian children's novel *The Spanish Cave* (1935), Conradian in the manner of "Typhoon" and "The Secret Sharer," not *Heart of Darkness*.

After the ominous initial glimpses of mysterious details—a submarine-like shape moving out to sea at night, an uncanny shrill whistling

noise, a sinister look to the water, the unexplained disappearance of a fishing vessel—things are narrowed down by the exercise of reason (including that of the parish priest and an old Basque ship-builder) and a bit of informal historical research, to the likelihood that a prehistoric sea monster lives in the cave of the title.

But tracking it down does not thereby become a simple matter. It is a hunt in the dark, underground, in a system of caves that exists fragmentarily in the light of the small boat's spotlight, against an adversary who likewise shows himself only fragmentarily.

And the efforts that have been taken to narrow the zone of ignorance and danger help to make possible, in conjunction with the skill of two grown-ups and the assumed but not yet fully tested valour of the boy hero, the final overcoming of the monster (an intelligible monster, with both pathos and, in its reptilian way, dignity, and one which in our own enlightened times, would of course have been handled very differently, the whole area swarming with sympathetic biologists and TV camera crews.

At the end, when the boy is adopted by the ship-builder, we are given convincing reminders of the reality—a natural, not a supernatural reality—of the “underground” European tradition of witches and natural magic.

Which is to say, of modes of knowing and doing.

## **Music, Words, and the Construction of Meaning**

### **I**

A good deal of would-be intimidating nonsense has been talked about the indeterminacy of words.

Let me offer an analogy from music scores. A dot or circle will let you know that a note has a certain duration, which is about as vague as you can get. So, is it high pitched or low pitched? Well, for that we see where it goes on the stave, the rows of parallel lines. So, does it increase or diminish in volume? Another marking. And what is its timbre, is it smooth? vibrating? Yet another marking. And what is *making* the sound—a cello, a cornet, a bass drum, a piano accordion? More information required. And then we need to consider its

relationship to the notes preceding and following it on the staff. And after that there's the quality of the sound as made in performance by an individual musician, which *can't* be captured or defined on the score. And probably other things that I've overlooked.

## II

When you're reading a score, you are not looking at notes that intrinsically possessed certain qualities to begin with and were then strung together and given a context, like pearls on a necklace. You are looking at a whole system of notation in which the final meaning—the directives to musicians in performance—is provided by a combination of the elements that I have described.

And you're not coping with something intrinsically defective because it can't convey the *exact* in-performance expressive sounds that the composer or scorer may (but who is to say?) have had when creating that piece of music. You're looking at something that operates within a set of game rules known to both composers and performers, wherein an at times astonishing complexity and precision above the normal level of non-musical sound can be achieved, but in which there isn't, and can't be, a total determinacy.

## III

The analogy with verbal language isn't exact, of course. But it works well enough.

Elsewhere I offer the example of the notice "Watch batteries installed" glimpsed in the distance at a trade fair, the ambiguity of which vanishes when you see that it's at a booth displaying timepieces. The other elements of that booth (not all, of course; we don't need a multiple replication of signs) are part of the meaning of the phrase, and more particularly of the word "Watch," just as the various musical markings are part of the meaning of that circle.

In other contexts, the phrase "Watch batteries installed" could mean that you're invited to observe (for educational or promotional purposes) batteries being installed in some piece of equipment, or that batteries with the brand name "Watch" are installed here, or that (as announced triumphantly in a newspaper headline), such batteries have



successfully been installed somewhere in a difficult situation, or that, in a military connection, batteries of guns have been put in place in surveillance outposts.

#### IV

This is not mysterious. It is how language operates. A mystery is only made if you assume that the signifier “watch” (which for all I know means “potato pancake” in some other language) has an intrinsic meaning, and that the newspaper page, or the display items and names in the booth are “merely” contexts, in the sense that dough would be the context of a pearl that you dropped in it.

It is true that we are speaking of something far less clear here than the replicable stave lines in which that dot was located. But we are still in a system where a signifier is one of a cluster of *contributors* to meaning. Which is different from saying that once one knows what the signified is, one has a fixed sign, in the sense that the pearl is a known quantity regardless of the dough—a spherical, natural, saltwater pearl worth \$1200, or whatever the case may be.

#### V

All this is without even considering the shifts in meaning that come with the different voicings of words, such as the phrase “Oh really,” with its multiple possible meanings that can’t, except by absurd feats of terminological ingenuity, be “scored” on the page beyond the minimal exclamation or question marks.

You could go crazy staring at those two words in isolation and trying to intuit the meaning that you know *must* be there.

Or also start scaring people with talk about the indeterminacy and arbitrariness of language. Meaning, who’s to say what’s right or wrong?

#### **Analogy-making**

At one point in “Vision and Analogy” I postulate a primal hunter, after the beast is slain, who makes a jackal-like yipping noise and points to one of his fellows, implying that the latter was holding back while the

others took the risks, and now expects some of the spoils. Is that yipping a “word”— “a cowardly opportunist like a jackal “(etc)—or a “sentence”—“you are/ he is a cowardly opportunist who” (etc)?

The noise is transferable. Others could make it and mean the same thing. And not just about that particular individual. In each instance, though, a pointing of some kind (finger, eye-rolling) would have to be part of the sign, otherwise someone would just be imitating the noise a jackal makes.

## **Classifying**

“...major or minor according to the outmoded viewpoint of study guides.” (André Breton, *Conversations*)

## **Risk**

Describing a visit by himself and a friend to a flying-rally in Italy, Kafka (yes, Franz K.) reports how at one point, when the great Blériot was in the air,

Devotedly everybody looks up to him, there is no room in anybody’s heart for anyone else. And everybody looks with outstretched neck at the monoplane, as it falls, is seized by Blériot, and even climbs. What is happening? Here, above us, there is a man twenty metres above the earth, imprisoned in a wooden box, and pitting his strength against an invisible danger which he has taken on of his own free will.

In contrast, when another of the aviators makes a prize-winning flight,

It is a perfect achievement; but perfect achievements cannot be appreciated; everyone, when you come to think of it, thinks he is capable of a perfect achievement, no courage seems to be needed for perfect achievements.

It isn’t just thrillers or daring feats of flying that draw us forward by our curiosity—and anxiety— about what happens next... and next... and next. With a consciousness that what is happening could easily *not* be happening.

In his lovely *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, David Pye says of certain kinds of making that “the essential idea is that the quality of the result is continually at risk during the process of making, and so I shall call this kind of workmanship ‘The workmanship of risk’ ...”

## Interpretation

“You can prove almost anything by italicizing certain words in a poem and ignoring their context; or by picking out scattered images in a long narrative poem and putting them side by side, and then suggesting that they colour the whole of it; or by deciding that the poet about whom you are writing was obsessed by a particular shape, and then making almost any mountain, group of trees, cloud, light-effect, building, balloon or head that the poet mentions fit that shape.”

Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (1968).

## Statement

Sometimes plain statements can make your eyes tingle, as in the quasi-sestet here, developing out of and going on from the more figurative and also tingling quasi-octave. It must be one of Rilke’s best-loved poems.

### *Herbsttag*

Herr: es ist Zeit. Der Sommer war sehr gross.  
Leg deinem Schatten auf die Sonnenuhren,  
und auf den Fluren lass die Winde los.

Befiehl den letzten Früchten voll zu sein;  
gieb ihnen noch zwei südlichere Tage,  
dränge sie zur Vollendung hin und jage  
die letzte Süsse in den schweren Wein.

Wie jetzt kein Haus hat, haut sich keines mehr.  
Wer jetzt allein ist, wird es lange bleiben,  
wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben  
und wird in den Alleen hin und her  
unruhig wandern, wenn die Blätter treiben.

Here it is in Stephen Mitchell's excellent translation.

### **Autumn Day**

Lord: it is time. The huge summer has gone by.  
Now overlap the sundials with your shadows,  
and on the meadows let the wind go free.

Command the fruits to swell on tree and vine;  
grant them a few more warm transparent days,  
urge them on to fulfillment then, and press  
the final sweetness into the heavy wine.

Whoever has no house now, will never have one.  
Whoever is alone will stay alone,  
will sit, read, write long letters through the evening,  
and wander on the boulevards, up and down,  
restlessly, while the dry leaves are blowing.

*Ahead of All Parting; the Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer  
Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (Modern Library,  
1995)

You can *feel* the desolation of those boulevards with the sidewalk tables and chairs back indoors, or out there empty and forlorn, *fin de saison*. Perhaps some of the letters would be written at them. "Through the evening" is only there to fill out the line.

There are almost no adjective-noun constructions here, and what there are ("heavy wine," etc) aren't colourful. Jazzing up your writing with "interesting" adjectives is lazy writing. But you can't just go through what you've written and strike adjectives out.

What matters, as it does here, is *seeing* things, activities, relationships in your mind's eye so clearly that linked adjectives, when they come, come as clarifiers, not would-be creators.

### **Sites**

In *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*, Alethea Hayter describes (pp. 265-6) the shift from a more or less literal to a more or less symbolist mode of landscape description, neither of them intrinsically superior to the other—though if the latter doesn't intensify elements in

the former, as in Caspar David Friedrich or Arnold Böcklin, you are liable to end up with the melodramatic and shadowy impressionism of Poe.

There's a natural continuum from the actual feared dungeons and torture-chambers of pre-Enlightenment castles, via ruined castles as mysterious spaces haunted by the clanking of men-at-arms and the cries and groans of the victims of total power, to the surreality of Piranesi's *Prisons* (themselves a condensation of aspects of the literal ruins in his other etchings), which, according to Hayter, became metaphors for indecipherable *enclosed* heights and depths in individual psychodramas.

The figures and activities in *Prisons*, like the spaces and objects, *do not make sense* and defy interpretation.

Piranesi's etchings thrilled me over fifty years ago when I was able to go through two or three volumes in the Bodleian Library while working on the Gothic Revival, the assigned topic of my essay for that week.

But actually the most exciting images were the "documentary" ones in the original outsize volumes with their gorgeous thick paper. The ruined buildings mostly felt *too big*, in the manner of dreams, and their rotting and sometimes weed-grown stonework had an oddly organic texture.

You could feel Time at its task, devouring.

Christopher Woodward's *In Ruins* is a lovely read about ruins and the romantic imagination.

## **Adjectives**

"April is the cruelest month" is an unforgettable statement, drawing you into the process of perception. The phrase "cruelest April" would be weaker,

In the first stanza of Stevens' "Sunday Morning," we're not told about a "complacent peignoir." Instead we're given

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late  
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,  
And the green freedom of a cockatoo

Upon a rug...

Simple adjectives—"late," "sunny," "green"—but each doing real work, with a progression away from literalness. The coffee is being drunk later than the usual breakfast time, the sun is falling on the person, not the chair, it's the freely-moving cockatoo (on the rug? on a perch on a rug?) that's green.

And this isn't just a list, sitting there inertly. These things "mingle" (Germanic) and (Latinate) "dissipate" something, and what they dissipate is "The holy hush of ancient sacrifice," in a strong conjunction of two vastly different modes of being.

Buñuel recalls how sometimes he and his cameraman would have fun working out really arty set-ups—and then go ahead and shoot the scene as plainly as possible.

I doubt that Buñuel has been accused much of being banal.

## **Tradition**

Forty years ago I voiced in "Northrop Frye and Evaluation" and "Evaluation and English Studies" my exasperation with the conventional notion of canonicity.

One of the troubles with an unthought-through or badly thought through notion of tradition is that it's a push-over when radical political challengers come along.

Having refused to think its way seriously through the principles and practices of Leavis and Winters, the conservative academic American establishment had no defences when Derrida and De Man came barrelling in, cheered on by their *collabos*, like the Wehrmacht making an end-run round the Maginot Line through Belgium in 1940.

## **Self**

There is no "I," no "Ich" in Rilke's "Herbsttag"—the actual words, I mean. You don't have to find out who's speaking, or fit the poem together with other poems by the author. You don't even need the author's name.

But there's an intensely present self, at once individual and sharable, in the yearning and hoping and defining of the first seven lines, at this particular cusp of the year.

And the sad knowledge of the last five lines had to have been earned personally in some way.

It is a fate that could be awaiting the self now. Or that was experienced in the past and could still, with an insufficient commitment to organic being, return.

“There but for the grace...”

## **Dancing**

Part of the appeal of free verse—a very broad term—is that, like certain modes of dancing, while some of it can indeed be done very well, only a Grinch would suggest that a lot of it is probably being done badly.

Whereas everyone knows how to laugh at jog-trot rhythms and moon/June rhyming.

The social world changed permanently around 1960 with the Twist. Previously, dancing, like etiquette, was something that you got *wrong*. An interviewer asked Philip Larkin whether he had danced as a boy. “Dance, you mean *dance*?” A whole world of male-adolescent yearning and dread was evoked there in his raised-eyebrows incredulity.

Dancing was an affair of forms—Foxtrot, Quickstep, Waltz—that you could either do or you *couldn't*, so that you tried to get by with an embarrassed shuffle. And smoothies whirled around like show-off skaters in the middle of a roller-skating rink.

With the Twist, you could simply stand there with your hands in the air and wiggle. You didn't even have to *touch* your partner.

Free-verse is quicker to write, too—a great advantage when you want to get another book out.

## Presence

Here is a poem from nearer our own time, highly formal (but *not* formalistic), and full of a voiced “presence”—Martha Collins’ lovely villanelle “**The Story We Know.**”

The way to begin is always the same: Hello,  
Hello. Your hand, your name. So glad. Just fine,  
and Good-bye at the end. That’s every story we know,

and why pretend? But lunch tomorrow? No?  
Yes? An omelette, salad, chilled white wine?  
The way to begin is simple, sane, Hello,

and then it’s Sunday, coffee, the *Times*, a slow  
day by the fire, dinner at eight or nine  
and Good-bye. In the end, this is a story we know

so well we don’t turn the page, or look below  
the picture, or follow the words to the next line:  
The way to begin is always the same Hello.

But one night, through the latticed window, snow  
begins to whiten the air, and the tall white pine.  
Good-bye is the end of every story we know

that night, and when we close the curtains, oh,  
we hold each other against that cold white sign  
of the way we all begin and end. Hello,  
Good-bye is the only story. We know, we know.

## High Romanticism

The following, from Lautréamont’s *Poésies* (1870), published in the year of his death at the age of twenty-four, is just so damn funny— but *serious-funny*—, encapsulating with the shrewdness of good cartooning the enormous energies of high Romanticism:

Since Racine, poetry has not progressed one millimeter. It has fallen backwards. Thanks to whom? To the Great Softheads of our epoch. Thanks to the Sissies—Chateaubriand, the Melancholy-Mohican; Sénancourt, the Man-in-the-Petticoat; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Sulky-Socialist; Edgar Poe, the Mackamuck-of-



Alcoholic-Dreams; Mathurin, the Godfather-of-Shadows; Georges Sand, the Circumcised-Hermaphrodite; Théophile Gautier, the Incomparable-Grocer; Lecomte, the Devil's-Captive; Goethe, the Weeping-Suicide; Sainte-Beuve, the Laughing-Suicide; Lamartine, the Tearful-Stork; Lermontoff, the Bellowing-Tiger; Victor Hugo, the Funereal-Greenstick; Mickiewicz, Satan's-Imitator; Musset, the Intellectual-Shirtless-Dandy; and Byron, the Hippopotamus-of-the-Infernal-Jungles.

I'm reassured to think that I've read substantial works or groups of works by Chateaubriand, Sénancourt, Rousseau, Poe, Gautier, Goethe, Hugo, Musset, and Byron. So I'm not *wholly* ignorant about Romanticism.

### **Consciousness**

“To be too conscious and conscious of too much, that is the plight.”

T.S. Eliot

“You don't know what is too much until you know what is *much* too much.”

William Blake (adapted)

### **Phenomenology**

Here's a lovely recent poem in free verse.

#### **The Season of Forgiveness**

*I'm going to lie down next to you  
As if nothing has happened:*

from Chorus For One Voice  
by Charles Simic

In this weather, wood has warped and doors  
won't shut the way they should. The mist holds daylight  
close, hoarding. When it escapes, the light doesn't  
spill, doesn't slide cross the floor, but creeps

and hobbles using furniture to hold itself up. It just wants  
to sit. In this weather, light has age, growing rings like a stump

and can no longer hear. It's the ancient relative in the corner  
with a change purse and a group of grandchildren at its feet.

Extension wires, 100 watt bulbs, nothing helps. It's faint  
and weak and only drinks water. In this weather, not even

the high tide of starlings rolling onto the lawn gets its attention.  
"Leave me alone," it says, having forgotten the way it ranted

and raved. How it demanded more time and more flowers.  
The garden couldn't keep up, it touched everything:

the silver sugar bowl, the glass fish, every mirror, every drop of  
water.

And so begins the season of forgiveness, when the birch trees

bordering the yard turn back to bark and branch and you're alone  
and I'm alone, the pantry is stocked  
and winter is coming up the driveway.

Susan Goyette (*Undone*, Brick Books, 2004)

It's kinetic verse, with a varying series of slowings, speed-ups, checks,  
halts, renewed speed-ups, etc., the words all telling you just how the  
poem should be read aloud. The quasi-couplets are meaningful  
organizers, with functional pauses at the end of each first line and  
stronger ones after the second line.

The enjambments are all expressive. You assume that "The mist holds  
daylight" is going to lead into a flow like the one that's preceded it.  
Instead, the containment is mimed with "close, hoarding." And then  
there's another miming with the flow that's broken with "creeps/ and  
hobbles," and another nice check with "It just wants/ to sit."

Subsequently, the smoothness of "It's the ancient relatives in the  
corner/ with a change purse and a group of grandchildren at its feet"  
gives way to the stop/start of "Extension wires, 100 watt bulbs,  
nothing helps. It's faint"

You can feel the weight of *being*—things hard to budge, energies held  
in check, the body's ageing, the expansiveness that builds up

momentarily after the central extension-wires stanza (reversing the more natural sequence of energies dwindling, as in Rilke's "Autumn Day") and then falters—and we feel winter's inexorable advance.

This is *verse*, not the too-familiar attempt to make poetry by means of arbitrary rhythms that aren't those of what we customarily think of as prose.

There's only a single "I" in "The Season of Forgiveness," yet the poem is intensely personal, and the last three lines quiver.

Oh, and light, the sun's light, has been rendered as the all-too-transient visitor and energizer that it is in these northern parts.

### **Reefer madness**

"Intense desire to communicate, to talk to idealized, perfect, intelligent listeners... Sense of extreme significance in the nature of the experience... The room seemed to become warmer and to lose, miraculously, all distance or orientation. I could not feel where the door led to, or that there *was* a door."

My own introduction to the Demon Weed fifty years ago, which I made notes about on the same night, left me quite certain that my mind was not in fact working better, and that my sense of an improved communication with my hosts was a delusion, and that I was perceiving them more superficially than I normally did.

Our slowed-down speech and occasional giggles were essentially (I now judge) a matter of our all feeling in much the same way at the same time in the same non-judgmental space, so that you could signal presentness simply with smiles and tones of voice and minimal gestures.

But, "Go to jail, go directly to jail, do not pass Go...."

That's the *real* madness, of course.

(Not that I'd particularly want to be in a plane piloted by Cheech and Chong.)

Booze had brought American fathers and sons closer together. The sons, aping maturity, made talkative show-off asses of themselves,

brawled, sexed (or tried to), threw up, and had punitive hangovers, as Dad had done before them. Guy stuff! Plus, for the love-the-sinner South, the groaning temporary (but all flesh is frail) hangover repentances.

Pot pushed them apart. The sons, with no mornings-after laid on them, withdrew unreachably into silences, and mysterious smiles, and an alien language—the language, the (imagined) feckless hedonism, of Them.

## **Diagram**

If you drew a cross, the vertical arm of which stood for degrees of “feeling” and the horizontal for degrees of “form,” you could place most poems somewhere or other in the four quadrants. Not that everyone would do so in the same way, of course.

## **Alcoholics**

A couple of lists are on the wall over my desk. One is of reportedly alcoholic American writers, the other of writers reportedly *not* alcoholics. I forget where I found them.

The “A” List:

Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Robinson, Millay, Hammett, Steinbeck, Agee, Kerouac, Capote, McCullers, Parker, Lewis, O’Neill, Lowell (Robert), Williams (Tennessee), O’Hara, Berryman, London, Crane (Hart), Aiken, Wolfe (Thomas), Lardner, Cozzens, Jones (James), Cheever, Stafford,

The Non-“A” List:

Pound, Eliot, Frost, Stevens, Hurston, Welty, Wharton, Cather, Wilder, Miller (Arthur), Glasgow, Williams (William Carlos), Porter, Bellow, Ellison, O’Connor (Flannery).

I wonder what a list of authorial “drug” users would look like.

## “Authority”

Reading, in translation, Lautréamont’s extraordinary *Chants de Maldoror* and the cryptic *Poésies*, I can sense André Breton reading them at the outset of his true career and feeling that this was indeed a voice, virtually anonymous, of genius speaking, so unprecedented and unpredictable and *shaped* was everything on those pages, and trying to sense what was intended by, what lay “behind,” the more gnomic utterances.

## Prose

“We speak of prose and the history of prose and make anthologies of English prose, but really there is no such things as prose. The term is a convenient dustbin for that which is neither poetry nor fiction.”

James Fenton, *NYRB*, Feb 13, 2003, 47

## Wordsworth

“[Wordsworth] was a person who early in life had an intense experience or series of experiences about inanimate nature, which he spent the rest of his poetical life trying to describe. He was not really interested in farm-labourers or any one else for themselves, but only in so far as they helped to explain this vision, and his own relation to it.”

W.H. Auden, introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* (1938)

## Lightness

One of the limitations of Leavis’ criticism was his inability or unwillingness to provide a significant place in his ecology for “small” poems. It was a limitation emphatically not shared by Winters, which is another reason, in addition to his deep understanding of the dynamics of Symbolism, why Winters is the greater critic of poetry.

However, a reviewer once quoted in Leavis’ great quarterly *Scrutiny* some lines from a song about undertakers and their assistants:

Look at their top hats—  
Polished with Guinness!

Ain't it grand  
To be bloomin' well dead?

The “serious” poet under discussion hadn't, he said, “produced anything to come within miles of that ‘Polished with Guinness’.”

And *Scrutiny's* great music critic Wilfred Mellers would later hail *Sergeant Pepper* when it appeared. When I read his review I immediately went out and bought my first Beatles album.

### **Seriousness**

When I was an undergraduate, I sat with others in a college lounge and heard Michael Powell, the most interesting of British movie directors back then, say that once you'd been to a place, you could reproduce it in the studio without faking.

So, too, it occurs to me, with the life of the mind. When you know what certain kinds of peaks and plateaus of seriousness are like, you can come down from them, if you wish. But if you *don't* know, you can't go *up*.

If there were pleasures that Leavis ignored, he was speaking always on behalf of works and values and states of being that themselves would otherwise get left out. And, like Breton, he attacked phony seriousness. He obviously wasn't insisting that everyone else live at the same pitch of moral strenuousness all the time.

It was in wartime *Scrutiny*, before Orwell's “In Defence of P.G. Wodehouse,” that R.C. Churchill argued that too much of an indignation was being made about Wodehouse's essentially naive broadcasts from Occupied Europe, by the same kinds of “traditionalists” who'd awarded him an honorary doctorate at Oxford.

In the course of it he remarked that “Mr. Leavis would be surprised to know that at least two of *Scrutiny's* occasional contributors read Wodehouse and find him amusing on his own level.”

Surrealism ignored artificial boundaries (like those drawn on the post-WWI Middle Eastern map to designate nations) and made vitalizing connections between “high” and “low” possible.

Dada simply refused to acknowledge that there *was* a high.

## Rhyming

Non-adversarial playings and pleasings are every bit as much part of the reality of art, including modern art, as a programmatic and adversarial bleakness and disruptiveness

Some writers are at their best in their light verse—Auden, for example.

T.S. Eliot's Russian-born Jewish coeval, Irving Berlin, loved rhyming:

Heaven, I'm in heaven,  
And the cares that hung around me through the week  
Seem to vanish like a gambler's lucky streak  
When we're out together dancing cheek to cheek.

So Fred Astaire was given something to sing *about*, and a character with social knowledge.

“These Foolish Things” (words originally by Eric Maschwitz) has been parodied, cut, rephrased, and lives on.

In Greta Keller's lovely version fifty years ago, we have:

The park at evening [light pause] when the bell has sounded,  
The *Ile de France* [longer pause] with all the gulls around it.  
Oh how the ghost of you *clings*.  
These foolish things [pause]  
Remind me of you.

Here too the rhyming isn't merely clever.

We feel the *reaching*, in memory, after experiences that bracket their times together—the companionable quiet stroll at dusk; the luxury crossing on the crack French liner with its Art Deco interior, launched in 1926 and no doubt sailing now from New York, with Le Havre and the City of Lights awaiting.

And the reaching speeds up in Cole Porter's exhilarating “You're the Top,” as if the mind keeps going further for comparisons that will make clear how he *really* feels about the Other, each comparison adding to what's gone before, starting with Mr. Simplicity himself.

You're the top.  
You're Mahatma Gandhi.

You're the top.  
You're Napoleon brandy.  
You're the purple light  
Of a summer night  
In Spain.  
You're the National Gallery,  
You're Garbo's salary,  
You're [pause] cellophane.

Oh for those days of innocence when cellophane (invented in 1908 but not coming into its own until the later Twenties, says Google) was excitingly futuristic in its smooth cool difference from any previous covering.

And there's an ascent in the last six lines from timeless Romance, via traditional Culture, to the fictive glamour of stardom and money beyond the dreams of avarice, and then—cellophane!

And the Other (like Donne's in "A Valediction; Forbidding Mourning") is assumed to be an intelligent companion who appreciates wit.

## **Editing**

Proofing a Web article, I realized that in places I had been writing fast and carelessly, with a tacit assumption that this would be acceptable as a *sincere* rendering of my thought processes. In fact it was bad prose and made for lousy reading. So classicism had to come in and tidy romanticism's room. But if I *hadn't* written fast and carelessly, I wouldn't have found what I was trying to say.

## **Love poems**

Maybe it's only in the great pop ballads, where the slowing down of the words gives them more expressive weight, that you get the truest 20<sup>th</sup>-century love poetry, as distinct from relationship poetry.

Sinatra, so stiff and charmless and self-conscious at times when trying to *act* charming and relaxed in TV banter—so wincingly *dreadful* when up against Crosby in *High Society*—comes wholly alive and *sympathique* as soon as he can enter into the expressive spaces of love ballads (including "These Foolish Things") that he's made wholly his



own down to the last quiver of felt and meant phrasing, so that it is only of *that* that he is conscious, not of his “self” and how this activity is affecting his place in the pecking order.

A whole socio-sexual landscape of Love as it used to be, not that long ago, for a lot of women, with its despairs, and yearnings, and exhilarations, and wry acceptances, is contained in Joyce Breach’s marvellous *Confessions*, with the Loonis McGlohon Quartet.

### **Preserving Civ.**

I myself taught a section of “Introduction to Literature” every year, as we all did from choice in my department, where there was no freshman English as such. By the end (“This lyf so short, this craft so long to lerne”) I had some idea of how to go about it.

When I watched a graduate assistant, the poet David McGimpsey, working one of my classes on behalf of *Hedda Gabler* (you could practically see the cordless mike), and eliciting responses from chronically silent students that showed that they’d in fact been reading and thinking, I knew for sure that what defects there were weren’t in the students but in myself.

During my last two years I “taught” George Elliott Clarke’s then-recent verse novel *Whylah Falls* (1990), about a fictional rural Nova Scotian community in the 1930s.

Which is to say, I put together hand-outs containing a lot of practical Coles Notes-type information (not as easy to do as you might think, when there are no tracks in the snow to follow), divided the class up into teams of five, provided questions for everyone to think about, and let the teams and the other students do the talking about selected questions during our four or five meetings on the book.

In a theme assignment, I included the option of writing a poem to go somewhere in the sequence, plus an explanation of what need it was intended to fill. I thought that one or two students might attempt it, and would probably write doggerel. In fact a sizeable number had a go, and their poems were almost all acceptable, and two or three were excellent, and the explanations were thoughtful. The same thing happened the following year.

Most of the fifty-odd students in the class each year were science majors. None of them, to use Clarke's term, was Africadian.

I never became a great teacher of freshmen, but at the end of my final year one of them wrote anonymously on a course-evaluation form, "Professor Fraser is a darling, very bright and student oriented," which remains one of my three most cherished accolades.

## "Poetry"

Back in the Fifties some French critic, probably in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, announced that Charlton Heston, so big, so beautiful, *was* Cinema. In certain moods it's tempting to feel that "These Foolish Things," words and music together, the words adapted from decade to decade and singer to singer, "is" Poetry.

The sigh of midnight trains [pause] in empty stations,  
Silk stockings thrown aside, dance invitations,

The first line is virtually a poem in itself, instantly evoking the pleasant strangeness of a foreign station in a sleeping city out there beyond your first-class compartment, with your berths down, in the train bearing you to, maybe, the Riviera, paused now and with the engine giving an occasional hiss of steam.

And then it's enriched by the contrasting second line—phases, rhythms in a relationship, a life-style. (In Keller's version, it's "Two lovers on a street," instead of those stockings. Which may be better)

The poem lists things, but it's not just a list.

The winds of March [pause] that made my heart a dancer  
A telephone that rings [pause] but who's to answer?  
Oh, how the ghost of you clings [longer pause]  
These foolish things [pause] remind me of you

These are actions, each evoking in a different way a state of being—the exhilaration of a love-charged season, the poignancy of an absence (seen in the mind's eye as you grip the phone), the compressed sense of emotional presence as that ghost, that remembered presence, *clings*.

I guess there are people for whom all this is just upper-class nostalgic/sentimental nonsense. Personally I wouldn't want to be in a situation

where they had power over me or over individuals and things that I cared about.

## **Presences**

Some things are so omnipresent as to become taken-for-granted natural phenomena. The *real* history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century photography won't come into being until the classic black-and-white movie stills are factored into it as photographs in their own right.

## **Spectrum**

Plenitude >< Deprivation

2003/2013

## About the Author

JOHN FRASER'S print publications include three books with Cambridge University Press, plus numerous articles in journals, including the *Partisan Review*, *Southern Review*, *Yale Review*, *Cambridge Quarterly*, and *Studio International*. He did the entry on 20th-century American and British Poetics in the first edition of the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. His website, [www.jottings.ca](http://www.jottings.ca) includes his major revisionist anthology *A New Book of Verse*. His eBook *Nihilism, Modernism, and Value* has been issued by eBookit.

He was born in North London, educated in a provincial grammar school, and, after two years of National Service in the R.A.F., entered Balliol College, Oxford, as a junior scholar. Later he obtained a Ph.D. in English at the University of Minnesota, with a Philosophy minor, including classes from Wilfred Sellars and Alan Donagan.

He taught for thirty years at Dalhousie University, retiring as George Munro Professor, of English, and in 1991 gave the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto. He was married to the artist Carol Hoorn Fraser (1930–1991).

Critics found his widely-reviewed *Violence in the Arts* (1973) “both scholarly and extraordinarily interesting” (*New Republic*), “compellingly readable” (*Film Review Annual*), “continuously stimulating” (*Economist*), “profoundly illuminating” (*Psychology Today*), “brilliant” (*Los Angeles Times*), the product of “an extremely agile and incessantly active mind which illuminates almost every subject it touches” (*Spectator*).

A senior reviewer of *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (1982) in the *Yearbook of English Studies* called it “a brilliant and utterly absorbing work. There are not many learned books which have the unputdownable quality of a thriller; this is one of them.... None, I think, can read his book without profit, and certainly nobody will be bored.” The reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* found its documentation “awesome.”