

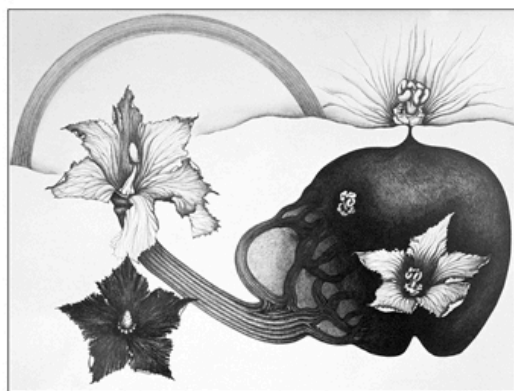


Pushing Back

Language, Truth,
and Consequences

John
Fraser

Pushing Back:
Language, Truth
and Consequences



John Fraser

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A number of the items here have come from <http://www.jottings.ca/john/voices/index.html>, where it was posted in 2002.

Cover design: John Fraser and Barbara Bickle.

The collage of doorways comes from the Web.

This book is without the customary scholarly apparatus. For information about quotations or allusions, see fraserj@eastlink.ca.

Pushing Back is for George Elliott Clarke and David McGimpsey

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“This is good stuff.”

New England pizza-maker

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I

Preface

Pushing Back (2014) is the fifth of my eBooks. The previous ones, all appearing in 2013–2014, are *Nihilism, Modernism, and Value; A Bit of This and a Bit of That about Poetry; Thrillers; and Desires: Sixty-Five Poems Translated from the French*.

Most of the pieces in *Pushing Back* come from my website, (www.jottings.ca, begun in 1992, with Rob Stevenson as webmaster), with new introductory and concluding material.

The following have appeared elsewhere.

“Playing for Real; Discourse and Authority,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 56 (1987).

“In Defence of Language; If it Needs it,” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 59 (1989).

“Mind-Forged Manacles; Reply to a Questionnaire,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 58 (1990).

“Music, Words, and the Construction of Meaning” is also in *A Bit of This and a Bit of That About Poetry* (eBook 2014).

“Mr. Frye and Evaluation” *Cambridge Quarterly* II/2 (Spring 1967) was reprinted in my *The Name of Action; Selected Articles* (Cambridge University Press, 1984).

“Descartes’ *Discourse on Method*; a Look at its Rhetoric” was in *GSE*, II/3 (1959) under the pseudonym of James English.

“Swift and the Decay of Letters” (1955) was in *The Name of Action* (1984).

“Vision and Analogy” and “Winters, Leavis, and Language” are also in *A Bit of This and a Bit of That About Poetry* (eBook 2014).

“Intellection and Honor; Playing the Game” was given as a talk to the Department of English and Philosophy at the United States Military Academy, West Point, in 1988.

The cover was designed by John Fraser and Barbara Bickle.

Introduction

... this eternal looking beyond appearances for the 'real,' on the part of people who have never even been conscious appearances.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Jerry I can't ask the guy for more cigars after you burned down his cabin.

Kramer Why, what has one thing to do with another?

Seinfeld, "The Cheever Letters"

I

A Martian wants to come calling. But how, he asks on his device, will he attract your attention when he's at your door?

Oh, just ring the door bell.

A bell? There's a bell on the door?

Well, not literally a bell, of course, not like when you used to pull a door-bell-pull and a wire would shake a bell inside. With bells in the kitchen for different rooms. Like in country-house movies, you know, or *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Nowadays it's electric circuitry and magnetism or something. Anyway just ring the bell. Greta, my wife you know, picked a nice set of chimes. They remind her of the church bells in Bavaria, she says. That's in Germany, southern Germany. She grew up there. So come on over, old chap. She's dying to meet you. Ta-ta for now.

Something is wrong.

The Martian is not happy. He is in front of the door now. He has anxieties.

Electricity? Magnetism?

What he really needed to be told, it emerges, was something like :

In the left side of the door frame there's a small circular protuberance. Press it in gently with your tentacle until it can go no further, hold for a couple of seconds, and release. No, your tentacle won't be trapped or shocked, no you can't damage the button, no I won't be annoyed by the sound. And I'll come to the door.

II

This is realworld here for the Martian, outside the door. Not the circuitry behind it, or the history of house bells, or the lives of the occupants.

This is where a tentacle or thumb hurts if you hit it with a hammer or a police interrogator does so. Ethics—hurting or withholding pain from others. Trying to, anyway.

Reality? The Real?

III

In my university, the Psychology Department was heavily into learning-theory for a number of years. The mazes through which grant-supported rats were run would have stretched over the hills and far away. Knowledge, the Real Nature of Things, was being acquired.

I rarely missed a meeting of the Arts and Science faculty. But I literally never heard anything said at any of them about how to facilitate learning by students. For all its rats, and pigeons, and a couple of seals, the Psychology Department could have been the Department of Aquaculture. Psychologists rarely came to faculty meetings. They weren't interested in mere subjective anecdotage.

They were in pursuit of Reality, the really real. They had the future in their bones. Or their equipment.

IV

For a number of summers now there has been a lively jazz festival in my city-by-the sea, with performers coming from hither and yon. There is only one thing wrong with it from my perspective. There is no

Trad in it—no New Orleans, Dixieland, Ragtime. Gone the echoes of Louis, Bix, King, Pee-Wee, Sidney, Kid, Scott, Muggsy, Jelly Roll, Wild Bill, George, Bunk, etc.

The ears and minds of our organizers are Progressive. They obviously don't enjoy those sounds and are appalled by the thought of middle-aged white guys in red-and-white-striped blazers and straw boaters drawing affectionate crowds around them on the waterfront with "High Society," "Twelfth Street Rag," and so on.

That would *not* be Progressive. It wouldn't be where Jazz is really going.

V

In Kenneth Graham's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), Mr. Toad, shaking the dust of his ancestral manor house from his webbed feet, is out on the highway with his recently acquired gypsy caravan. It is elbowed off the road by a newfangled motor-car. Ratty is indignant, but Toad sits there in the dust blissed out and murmuring "Poop-poop!" Goodbye to little canary-coloured caravans.

He has seen the future, and it moves, and he will soon be behind a wheel himself. Later on there's the teensie problem of his manor-house having been being occupied by stoats and weasels from the Wild Wood during his adventuring, and having to be retaken by force. But let's not get into that.

VI

Recently I bought a BIG paperback anthology of post-modern (modernist?) American poetry (2011), The Trad versifying, the sentimental, canary-coloured, horse-drawn gypsy caravans, are GONE. This is the future, authenticated I'm sure by an abundance of Theory. This is the skinny on LANGUAGE. The really real.

Except that it isn't for me.

In Steven Soderbergh's movie *The Limey* (1999), a large black D.E.A. officer, after durable Terence Stamp has jive-talked at him in thieves' argot, says with weary patience, "There's only one thing that I don't

understand, and that's every motherfucking word that you've been saying."

It's not quite that bad with the anthology. There are some golden oldies like Kenneth Koch and Allen Ginsberg. But after a bit this simply isn't realworld for me. It's back out of sight behind that door, being realer than the mere common-or-garden world in front of it, where individuals are doing and saying identifiable things, with identifiable feelings, about identifiable subjects.

Identifiable??

VII

I know, I know, my ears are simply not attuned.

Back in wartime London, when most of our living went on in the dining room to save heat, I tried on one occasion to draw my father and stepmother's attention to some scratchy but glorious Louis Armstrong that was suddenly emerging from our radio, courtesy of the BBC Forces Programme. Surely, surely they would hear the tunefulness *here*. We didn't have a record player.

But for them it could just as well have been a traffic jam with horns honking. For that matter, chamber music was just noise to me then. I was thrilled some years later when, as a new immigrant to the States, I was Mike and Norma Zwerin's *schnorrer* out in Forest Hills and suddenly I started glimpsing melody in a Beethoven quartet.

Paris journalists mocked dapper little schoolteacher Stéphane Mallarmé extruding those gnomic utterances at his "Tuesdays" in his apartment in the Rue de Rome.

VIII

Nevertheless, when I talk about identifiability, how about:

praising, deploring, recalling, grieving, transgressing, playing, seducing, charming, meditating, puzzling, celebrating, taunting, speculating, amusing, explaining, defending, inviting, accusing, soothing, judging, apologizing, regretting, rejecting, reassuring,

scorning, reminding, comforting, exhorting, cajoling, reproving, condemning, denying, forgiving, taunting, defying, adoring.

I mean, how about the kinds of realworld topics that have filled anthologies across the centuries with things like love, and war, and fame, and death, and time, and politics, and children, and seasons, and sickness, and animals, and festivity, and injustice, on and on?

A lot of poems dealing with such things are still being written, largely in free verse. But there is a hovering question of what might be called *Zeitgeist* authenticity. Caravans? Motor-cars?

The whole thrust of that anthology seems to have been an avoidance of such realworld tedium, like the avoidance of accentual-syllabic meters by Anglo writers who misunderstand what is meant by saying that French verse is syllabic.

One wouldn't, would one? want to be instantly obsolete. And questions of principle are involved.

IX

To me, at least, the collection doesn't seem avant-garde at all but *fin-de-siècle*, like late 19th-century aestheticism escaping from the oppressive claims of Realism, Naturalism, Positivism.

With Mallarmé as a major cool transformer.

And some attendant problems about the "real."

X

In *A Rebours (Down There)* J.K. Huysmans brilliantly traced in 1884 the trajectory of wealthy hyper-aesthete Des Esseintes, who withdraws from vulgar bourgeois Paris to his country house and proceeds to construct an ideal environment of pleasing furnishings (one room gives the illusion of being in a ship's cabin), and a few books that are really worth reading (a major list, that), and exquisite foods and drinks.

Taken by a sudden fancy to visit romantic London, he spends a day in Paris en route. Where, after browsing in an English bookshop and

eating at an English restaurant (great wedges of beef, and tankards of jet-black stout), he decides that he's had all that London could offer, and goes back home.

But Realworld breaks in. A ferocious toothache drives him to the squalid, blood-spattered office of a tooth-puller with enormous wrists. And eventually his stomach goes back on him and he has to return to realworld Paris.

A texture, a kinetic interfacing, had been missing. A game played within given, not chosen, rules had been lost. "Mind," feelings, sensibility, perceptiveness were no substitute.

XI

If you were to ask me what my Martian looked like, how old he was, what he was wearing, what was the occasion of his trip, I couldn't answer.

Would a security camera show him wavering, almost touching the doorbell, jerking back, changing colour from green to red to yellow, consulting a device, trying again, recoiling again? Does he mistrust his memory of what he was told? Fear Earth technology?

This could all be worked up fictively into a miming—"The Martian and the Doorbell." Or, novelistically, we could be told about his feelings, why he's making this visit, what his occupation is (fellow scholar? secret agent?), and so forth—a writer's god-like omniscience that, along with dramatic soliloquies, fosters the illusion that we can peer inside one another's minds.

But the basics are a grounding, a feeling body and exploring mind in a physical space, and the texture is part of it. An android at the door wouldn't be the same thing. Terminator II would probably vaporize the door. Comedy time.

XII

Some no-nonsense person who briskly reduced the episode to "ringing a doorbell" would be missing things. If you don't partly enter into thought processes, you're NOT in the reality.

And, up to a point, we can share with the Martian in front of the door, as his initial questionings reveal.

We are not into some esoteric mind-space here with complicated Martian conventions about circles and rectangles and times of day and facing in which direction. This is not, from our perspective, a wholly private inaccessible experience and mindset.

Sharing is real. It's realworld.

Cattle being driven up straight ramps into the slaughterhouse panicked, backed up, had to be shocked or jabbed forward. But autistic Temple Grandin *knew* how they felt, knew that curving ramps were better.

It was real knowledge, not sentimentality. Put into practice, after hard-nosed male habit had had its obstructionist say, it worked. The cattle were calmer, the process was more humane, money was saved.

A cow, for her, was not "just" a cow.

XIII

In 1992 the son of the American artist Carol Lind Geary was killed in his early thirties while hang-gliding in California. Ceremonies of grieving, meditating, celebrating took place among his friends in several countries.

At the one in New Zealand, a coming-together out in the free air that he loved, texts were read out.

Several of them were New Age, like the occasion itself. But among them were Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar," Bryant's "To a Waterfowl" (both of them apparently favorites of his), and two stanzas from one of the great poems of recalling and comforting and keeping alive, Yeats's High-Trad "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," slightly tweaked.

The second of the stanzas, its form created by Abraham Cowley in the seventeenth century for his "On the Death of Mr. William Harvey," goes,

Some burn damp faggots, others may consume
The entire combustible world in one small room
As 'twere dried straw, and if we turn about,
The bare chimney is gone black out
Because the work had finished in that flare.
Soldiers scholar, horseman he,
As 'twere all life's epitome.
What made us dream that he could comb grey hair?

The sixth line was replaced at the ceremony with "Designer, climber, flyer, he".

(See, online, "New Zealand Service for Leo Geary, Oct. 3, 1992")

Going black out is an Irish folk locution, like the swans climbing the air in Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole."

XIV

Something is amiss when primary realworld emotions are scorned as being oh so old-hat, in contrast to the subtleties of a John Ashberry (not in actuality the returned spirit of Mallarmé or Stevens).

Something would be amiss if the moral and intellectual richness of *M*A*S*H* after the arrival of Colonel Potter and the departure of the loathsome Frank Burns were thought to have been made obsolete by all the violence since.

XV

In *How to Read* (1931), Ezra Pound, who wasn't afraid of basic principles, wrote:

Has literature a function in the state, in the aggregation of humans, in the republic, in the *res publica*? ... It has.

And this function is *not* the coercing or emotionally persuading, or bullying, or suppressing people into the acceptance of any one set or any six sets of opinions as opposed to any other one set or half-dozen sets of opinions.

It has to do with the clarity and vigour of “any and every” thought and opinion. It has to do with maintaining the very cleanliness of the tools, the health of the very matter of thought itself. Save in the rare and limited instances of invention in the plastic arts, or in mathematics, the individual cannot think and communicate his thoughts, the governor and legislator cannot act effectively or frame his laws, without words, and the solidity and value of these words is in the care of the damned and despised *literati*.

When their work goes rotten,—by that I do not mean when they express indecorous thoughts—but when their very medium, the very essence of their work, the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e. becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive or bloated, the whole machinery of social and of individual thought and order goes to pot. This is a lesson of history, and a lesson not yet learned.

The great writers need no debunking.

XVI

Prosperity doesn't trickle down, but bad ideas do. Sometimes they gush.

Reviewing *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1979) in the *London Review of Books*, S.L. Goldberg, commented:

All too often this genuinely philosophic interest goes with an amazing philosophical gullibility—an inability to distinguish assertions or speculations, especially if they are systematic and pretentious, from demonstrated truths. The result is an overall willingness to take some elaborated body of speculative theory as a body of established knowledge, and therefore as a validating basis for literary theory, and therefore as a programmatic rationale for pedagogical and critical practice.

And when the very medium of discourse goes rotten and hermetic, with language itself under attack, there are indeed, as Pound said, consequences.

When there is too much dissing of normal expository language, and too much casting of doubt on primary loves and angers, and

aspirations, the cynicism and nihilism spread downwards and weaken the urge to think and read and argue one's way to the realworld clarity and concreteness from which effective action issues.

It would be harder playing beginner's chess if you were smilingly assured that the so-called Grand Masters of the past are simply dead history, and that the real principles of the game haven't been understood until now, and that whenever you make what look like reasonable moves, they will have contrary results from what you have in mind, and that all of this is implicit in the nature of chessboards and chessmen.

Or doing carpentry when warned of the unreliability of one's tools and untrustworthiness of one's eyes. Or seeking erotic intimacy after being cautioned about what inevitably lurks behind the masks.

When things become too problematic people simply walk away, if they can. Or cease worrying about fine-tuning and objectivity and opt for what they *feel*.

XVII

Or turn violent.

Despite all the indignant moralizing, violence at times is the only move left in a rigged game where nominally there is communication, argumentation, reasoning, but in fact the empowered simply don't listen to the powerless.

One knows that nothing that one can say will have any effect. So that if one isn't content to have one's whole self negated, there is either an out-of-control explosion or an ongoing hard-edged animus.

XVIII

By now GBT (Great Big Theory) has reached a complexity behind the door that puts it beyond the reach of an effective frontal assault by amateurs. Too much terminology has to be mastered, with as little likelihood of success as teaching oneself Karate from books, or charging the machine guns through the Westfront mud and wire.

However, in 1940, Guderian's Panzers didn't assail the extended frontier fortress of France's Maginot Line. They simply went round it through the supposedly impenetrable forest of the Ardennes.

And there are lessons there and in the ability of bearded men in baggy clothes, equipped only with AK-47s and a few pounds of explosive, to make things unfunny for a hi-tech modern army.

In that paradigmatic *modernist* text *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, with its refusals to be bullied by the claims of Authority, whether priesthoods of one kind or another or just The Way Things Are, Stephen Dedalus clings to *non serviam* and stubbornly keeps working on the interplay between his realworld experiences and the terms applied to them by others.

If *non serviam* seems too pretentious a banner to carry, how about *illegitimi non carborundum*?

And the conviction that there is no linear March-of-History inevitability and obsolescence.

And that change is not the same thing as progress.

And that some things are better or worse than others.

And that valuing and truth-testing are essential human activities.

And that "literature" is not a magical kingdom in which those activities do not apply.

And that if someone is asking for your intellectual vote or money, it is up to them to explain themselves intelligibly, and your far from obsolete right to insist that they do so.

And that the soundest starting point is always a concern with how generalizations accord with one's own experiencing of particular works, high, low, or anywhere in between.

XIX

The rest of this Introduction consists of descriptions of the articles assembled in this book. They're the sorts of things that I myself don't

normally read, preferring Show to Tell. And they are in no way necessary for an understanding of the articles. But there are a lot of articles in a variety of modes, and though there isn't a start-to-finish argument, this isn't just a miscellany.

I am concerned in them, in various ways, with a false dichotomy in which "literature," especially poetry, either provides visionary insights into profound truths, courtesy of Imagination, Symbolism, and Metaphor, Inc., or, in a counter-view, is simply language trying to get above itself in ignorance of its own duplicitous nature.

In literature there are middle ways between Scylla and Charybdis, at least if one has unstopped ears—I mean other patterns than a congeries of apolitical subjectivities, and unshared forms, and phony boundaries between realword language, in all its variousness, and the languages of poetry.

XX

When most of the pieces here were written, it was natural to speak of a reader as "he." I have let this stand, rather than get into syntactical complications. I do not write like that in the more recent pieces, not in order to be diplomatic but because doing so would be untrue, as well as insulting.

The kind of thinking that I've been going after, though, has very largely been done by men.

In the first four pieces ...

Just a minute, just a minute. Apolitical? Did he say apolitical? What does that mean, apolitical? What does he want, 'This land is your land, this land is my land'? Doesn't he know that irony and aestheticism are political?"

Maybe, but I don't imagine that John Ashberry is keeping the Congressional millionaires and their paymasters awake nights.

To continue...

In the first four pieces, from which the title of the book comes, I look at some of the ways in which realworld communication indeed occurs,

and at how some language puzzlements are interesting but nothing to be scared of. It is practically a book in its own right.

“Playing for Real” is about political discourse and the implicit game-rules about language that make possible unauthoritarian discussion and decision-making in academic contexts. The prose is jargon-free but compact, and the article took about an hour to deliver as a public lecture at my university. Though I say it as shouldn’t, it’s important.

“In Defence of Language” is a bit flat at the outset, but picks up steam as it goes along and contains interesting examples.

“Communication, Communion, Communality” is the most user-friendly of the three, and covers a lot of terrain.

“Mind-forged Manacles” (Blake) is about the desirability (and actual practice of a number of important writers) of being able to convey one’s ideas, when necessary, in jargon-free prose, without mystification.

XXI

“Saying Simply” presents, unchanged, some handouts written for my graduate seminar on “Traditionalism and Experimentation in Poetry, 1880–1920” (actually we ranged across several centuries) in which I figure out that some dramatic departures from “ordinary” speech are not in fact portals into the Great Unknown or privileged accessing of The Truth.

The note about the style of *To the Lighthouse* was done for an undergraduate class.

XXII

Next, a look at some things going wrong.

The long article on Northrop Frye appeared in the later Sixties, before Theory, *Théorie*, THEORY was fully under way in North America. I was aware that there had been, going back a good way, something called literary theory. In fact I’d done the article on “20th Century American and British Poetics” for the first edition of the Princeton

Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics. But I didn't realize at the time that what Frye was peddling was a version of Structuralism.

What I did observe was Frye voicing the predominant resistance of "traditional" North American academics to the writings of critics like F.R. Leavis and Yvor Winters for whom Culture was not simply an affair of good and great works ("literature", "art") that the young must be taught to appreciate.

One can see in that article of Frye's why there was so little resistance, as in France in 1940, when De Man and Derrida came barrelling in like *Panzers*, to the plaudits of their East Coast collabos.

The two accompanying pieces are self-explanatory.

XXIII

Next, three articles trying to set some things right:

"Music, Words, and the Construction of Meaning" was buried in "Lagniappe" in *A Bit of This and a Bit of That about Poetry*. It seems to me to deserve better than that in its economical reminder of the kinds of things that can go into the creation of a structure that we call a "word."

It's a process very different from the naive absolutism wherein a word is taken to be a concept that is either full—charged with an almost supernatural pressure of meaning that corresponds to how things (since Plato) really-and-truly are because in effect it *finds* those qualities—and empty, because there is in fact nothing out there in the dark beyond the uncertain circle of the campfire.

"Vision and Analogy" and "Winters, Leavis, and Language" are also recycled from *A Bit Of*, and deal with some of the linguistic riches that are not in fact dependent on any residual Platonism.

The two "evaluative" critics who figure in them are, both of them, interrogators and re-assemblers, and a good deal more functionally sophisticated about the workings of language, and the act of "reading," than the overweening Frye.

XXIV

The articles about Descartes, Swift, and Nerval are put into the same box because the first two in one direction and the third in a nominally opposite one complicate some over-simple ideas of “reason” and “romanticism.”

When one looks at the seething energies below the surfaces in the first two and the alert and in part classical (not neo-classical) intelligence at work in the third, one has interesting examples of a counterpointing richness in individual works that has nothing to do with any ontological magic of “language” as such.

“Descartes’ Discourse” appeared pseudonymously in a quarterly that five of us Ph.D. students at the University of Minnesota had started in 1957, and which, *mirabile dictu*, came out, unsubsidized and on time, for twelve issues. We had no other critical article for that particular issue, hence the pseudonym. We didn’t want to seem inbred.

Four of us had done minors in the important philosophy department at Minnesota, headed by the brilliant Wilfrid Sellars. In our various ways we were dissatisfied with the sacred status of the degenerating New Criticism.

My article, I have come to realize, was post-structuralist before the fact. What is described in it is a text that looks like one of the great exemplars of the new rationality in philosophy. Examined more attentively, it becomes a good deal less innocently factual. Entwined in it, I argue, were three very different images of the life of effective mind, one of them violent, and the reader in a sense constructed a subtext for himself, depending on his disposition.

In *The Tale of a Tub* (1704), Swift offers, among other things, a powerful critique of the new rationalism in the light of the older classical-aristocratic energies, and takes us out into the social milieu where works were made and read. What he was glimpsing would come to pass.

Gérard de Nerval has figured as a Portal figure, through whose works you enter upon strange seas of thought and experience, with the sonnet “El Desdichado” serving as an iconic poem of deep allusions.

This take on him has come to seem to me seriously misleading.

He was not, so far as I can determine, a mystic voyager in deeper-than-deep depths who finally drowned there.

Instead, in his best prose writings he was a brilliant psychological fictionist, the term “psychological” here having nothing to do with any therapeutic remnants of Freudianism or other systems, but simply refers to renderings of the movements of mind, without any trace of waftiness or mushy subjectivity. Proust admired him and learned from him.

Nerval also wrote politically, from an anti-authoritarian perspective, and at times was very funny.

These qualities are there in the poems and fictions that I discuss. You do not have to embark on an endless *sui generis* attempt to understand him as a whole, so that *then* you can understand what he was getting at in particular works. We can *know* what was going on in particular works. What was happening in his “mind” is guesswork and fictioneering.

He was a lovely writer. I’m speaking holistically now, just as if about this or that actual acquaintance. But there is nothing wrong about that when done right, as in Paula Byrnes’ brilliant and moving *The Real Jane Austen; a Life in Small Things* (2013), drawing on texts at the time without any attempt, any more than with someone of your acquaintance, at a phony homogenizing.

All this is realworld, in front of the door.

XXV

On the strength of my big print-book *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (1982), I was invited in 1987 to make a couple of presentations at the United States Military Academy at West Point, overlooking the Hudson, on a bitter cold day.

I was totally out of my element, hadn’t had my hair cut in time, didn’t know how to speak individually with those bright young officers seconded there for a spell of teaching, and wasn’t instantly on board

about the approaching Army-Navy game. But I was able to say some things that interested me in the paper that I read to the faculty of Literature and Philosophy, about the virtues, at once martial and intellectual, that figured unironically in the postmodernist Borges.

There were very few questions that I can recall. Maybe the assembled officers felt, not unreasonably, that the U.S. Armed Forces didn't need to go to a blind, bookish Argentinian deviser of enigmatic fables for validation of their own ideas of honour. But a young instructor gave me a lively realworld argument afterwards about the nature of authority, with both of us drawing circles and lines on a blackboard.

XXVI

In "In Front of the Door" I take advantage of the jottings form—Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Adorno, etc—to move in among some of the complexities behind the transactions that I briskly describe in the initial "In Defense of Language" quartet, not in order to undercut them, but focussing a bit more on the complexities of being a self doing the thinking and stating and suggesting, without firm conceptual outlines having been already established.

"Lagniappe" is a selection from earlier jottings.

"What's in a Name?" and the accompanying note are a spin-off from "In Front of the Door" that may have their own kind of interest for students of the author in question.

The Notes are recent add-ons.

"Such order from confusion sprung" was Swift's partial summation of the lady's dressing-table which he had been investigating. It applies, I imagine, to quite a lot of intellection. In a (*New Yorker?*) cartoon years ago, one sees a pensive Einstein with over his head a thought-balloon containing "E=mc²? E=mc³? E=mc⁴?"

XXVII

I've done my best to avoid jargon, unless one uses the word in a technical sense about metrics. Jargon hints at lots of "background" facts that need to be known if this or that term is to be fully

meaningful, or even intelligible. The question here, however, is not how well what I have said accords with this or that theory, however BIG, but whether it makes sense and seems plausible.

I also don't follow the procedures of what I think of as the Harvard School of Intellectual Exposition, with a thesis statement at the outset, and sequences of topic sentences that develop it, with bits of evidence dangling from them which the skimming eye can pass over if it wishes, in its haste to come to judgment on the thesis.

The most "rigorous" of the pieces is the take-no-prisoners engagement with Frye. For the rest I try to be clear without pretending to be Doctor De Moreau icily burning out the "sentimental" from his screaming subjects in the House of Pain.

I have said nothing about the kinds of good and great scholarship that don't involve naive leaps or slithers from fact to value, or any presumptuous certitude about the inner workings of hypothesized minds, but persuasively illuminates the lives of writers in their realworld contexts, not always to their credit.

That kind of reading is obviously not what you need to do if you are a forensic critic who knows in advance what you are going to detect in any work, and for whom the only problem is where to look for the body.

But one needs to resist the bullying insistence that until one knows everything about something one cannot say anything of value about it.

And hold fast to the fact that the first things to know about a work are the words on the page and in the mind's ear. Speech. We are all speakers. And listeners.

And that the most important contexts for clarifying to oneself what they are and aren't are other works in more or less similar modes.

XXVIII

Of course doorways can also be portals. But in my own iconography they do not take you to ultimate truths like those in the volume that the endless searchers through the infinity of octagonal rooms in Borges

“The Library of Babel” are convinced must be there. Or the *Necronomicon* of the Mad Arab Abdul Alhazred.

But who knows, the Martian may have found that he himself had passed through a portal once he was inside that door.

2014

II

Playing for Real

Discourse and Authority (1987)

I

We live amidst an interminable clatter and jostle of discourse; of endlessly proliferating texts; of seemingly infinite regressions wherein to understand A, you must first understand B, and to understand B, you must first understand C, etc.

And yet we muddle along somehow.

Most of what we “know” is there for us because of what we have read or been told; and we make commitments because of it—buy this stereo system rather than that; sign a petition about nuclear disarmament; vote in such-and-such a way at a meeting; see a movie we wouldn’t have seen otherwise (and later recommend it to someone else).

I am interested here in the *grounding* of commitments: in how we can and do achieve a measure of stability; in how we have, at times, what we think is a reasonable trust in the discourse of others; so that when we, in our turn, seek to influence others, we are not being merely random or arbitrary.

I am especially concerned with the groundings that are appropriate to a university community. If I were a preacher, my text might be, “The spirit killeth, the letter giveth life”.

II

Let me begin with some unsatisfactory models of discourse. I shall be speaking impressionistically, but I suspect that most people conceptualize impressionistically, with the aid of half-formed images derived, ultimately, from literature.

At least, I know *I* do.

First of all, there is discourse—serious discourse—as overheard monologues.

A message is transmitted and decoded—sometimes a very long one—and (if this is a discussion) a message is sent back and decoded in its turn; and so on. And if a tape-recorder has been running, one can sit down and read the transcript—the “text”—of what was communicated.

Implicit in this model, usually, is the feeling that when the transmitted messages concern the “real” world, the world in which sentient beings suffer pain, we have what might be called a reservoir/conduit situation.

The truths—the shocking or uplifting truths—about this or that foreign country are *there*, and when anyone with first-hand experience of those countries speaks, a tap is turned and the truth flows.

The realities of Central America, say, flow to us from the investigative journalist, or political refugee, or returned academic who tells us what actions we *must*, as decent members of the academic community, take with respect to them.

Such people have “authority”—the authority of knowledge; the moral authority of right feeling. To question what they report and demand feels cheap and nasty.

III

Well, I can understand that attitude; it comes into play for me too when I read something that makes my blood boil.

But discourse is, of course, not a conduit; it is... discourse—a complex of selection, interpretation, fallible recollection, etc.

Which is why we have the clatter and jostle that I referred to—the wildly conflicting arguments about what “really” happened when that Korean airliner was shot down over the Soviet Union, the vertiginous somersaultings about Southeast Asia, the endless revisionism about almost everything.

And the attitude that I’ve described is intrinsically authoritarian. Certain truths are established beyond question, certain people are in possession of them, and there is no point to arguing about them.

IV

This view of discourse—and of the truth-bearer—resembles the idea of the creative writer—quintessentially The Poet—as a monologist with a special kind of knowledge that flows out and fills a variety of vessels (a delicate vase here, a massive tankard there) but is always essentially the *same* knowledge, whether of the universe or of the movements of his or her own soul.

The idea of The Poet is a curious one, of course. People don't say honorifically, "You're a real Composer," even though composing music is much more mysterious than writing verse. Nor do they sneer at Arthur Hailey's *Airport* as not "really" a novel.

And, as we have learned to our cost, there are dangers in the idea of special knowledge.

If a poet can be a seer whose truth-filled individual poems connect up into a prose-statement system with a special authority, then other "inspired" figures can also have a privileged status.

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow travels up the Congo towards Kurtz in the hope of hearing "truths" from him; and Kurtz, that remarkable man, that artist, orator, potential leader of an extreme party, obligingly discourses; thereby weakening Marlow's will to live.

Subsequently, in the extreme politics of Europe, another artist-*manqué* would discourse to far more terrible effect.

V

In the view that I've just sketched, the poet is a sort of blessed epitome of undistorted perception—the quintessential preserved child, perfectly clear-eyed and candid about what it sees Out There, perfectly truthful about how it feels.

You cannot *argue* with such a being.

And inherent in the idea of the organic poetic self is a devaluing of language, forms, structures, a feeling that what really matters is the poetic thought, the "truths," not the "mere words"; just as what matters in the reservoir-conduit view of political realities is "the facts."

So that lower-structure utterances—letters; diaries, the *obiter dicta* of talk with a recording admirer—become more *real*, more authentic, than high-structure ones.

These devaluings can go further too. A short way down the road is the feeling that discourse is essentially symbolic and symptomatic—an elaborate system of maskings and codings behind which, when penetrated, lies the “real” state of mind of the speaker.

So that we pass from a belief in the perfect truth of “truly” poetic utterance to the belief that all utterances, in so far as they pretend to literality, are equally truthless; which is to say, equally undeserving of esteem with respect to what they assert.

And in a further reductive twist, that “real” state of mind dwindles to a system of manoeuvres on behalf of an infantilistic yearning for plenitude—the plenitude of a perfect coinciding of possession and desire.

So that even the ostensibly rational discourse of law-making, with its prohibitions and compulsions, collapses into fictiveness, arbitrariness, and duplicity.

VI

On the face of things, this ought to bring us all back to a perfect equality of authority; *no*-one has it.

But of course, as Lenin said, “Who? Whom?” The question remains, in the world of power, of who is going to do what to whom.

And what matters there is action—“politically correct” action—and not mere words, with behind such action the sustaining pastoral myth of an eventual plenitude in which the Earth, our benign mother, gives in sweet abundance all that we desire and all our dealings with each other are harmonious.

And authority situations—the right to command, the right to prohibit—also remain, but with larger claims than before and a greater impatience with—at times a positive fury towards—resistance.

The facts are *known*, and to question them is to be behaving outrageously and beyond the protective pale of reason.

And a concern with definitions, rules, forms, and procedures becomes another instance of mere talk, an obstructionist attempt to thwart a desired and obviously good end.

As someone said indignantly some years ago in my hearing during a debate about which of various union policies to pursue, “Why are we talking so much? Why don’t we *act*?”

VII

In all this there is a coarsening of options with respect to our relationship to discourse.

Either there is free-play, in which the words of literature and other texts have no grounding and no authority and one can do with them as one wishes in one’s own pursuit of power and plenitude.

Or there is an insisted-on surrender to the politically correct words: “As Engels has shown...”, “The Executive Committee feels...”, etc.

And determining who possesses face-to-face authority over whom becomes a matter of signs.

The secret police produce their identity cards (a move with analogies to certifying that someone is “really” a poet); and a wrong turn of phrase or a wrong book on a bookshelf reveals that they are dealing with an enemy of the people.

The working assumption here, of course, is that a true predictive theory of power relationships in the real world has been established, and that all you need do to know how individuals think, and what behaviour to expect of them is decide which pigeonhole they belong in.

All this is authoritarianism; I dislike authoritarianism.

Authority, the kind of authority that I am concerned with here, seems to me very different.

VIII

Let me offer—or recall—an alternative model of discourse: discourse as conversation.

Implicit in the monologue model is the assumption of the full presence of the speaker in his or her words. He or she “knows” what he or she means and wants, and communicates it (or seeks to do so) with full intentionality.

The inadequacy of that model is obvious when we think of conversation as we experience it—of the whole mix of gestures, jokes, hints, allusions, and so on, in which we say things that we had no prior intention of saying, and find that we know things that we were not previously conscious of knowing.

IX

An ostensibly casual conversation can be a complex thing, with its start-of-play signals (“Hi! How have you been keeping?”), soundings-out (“Did his manner strike you as a bit odd?”), movements towards action (“I wonder if somebody shouldn’t...”), and so forth.

And when it reaches closure (an annoyance tacitly buried, an agreement to do something reached), it can do so complexly.

Conversation—actual, unrecorded, face-to-face conversation—is not a text that the participants can read, skim, re-enter at will at any point.

It is a walk through a wood in which the trails keep forking. Or a game: sometimes, a game in which the roles and rules keep changing.

And it partly consumes itself. As the carpet unrolls in front of us it rolls up behind, and we cannot be fully conscious both of what is going on now and what went on earlier in it.

I shall return to some of these points.

X

I suggest that our spoken discourse consists of a series of comings-together—this seminar hour, that department meeting, that two-person conversation outside the library—with their own kinds of shapes and closures.

I suggest that authority, in contrast to authoritarianism, lies *in* those encounters: in the processes, in the conclusions (if any).

It does not pre-exist the encounter.

No-one comes empowered to give orders; to impose his or her will: to *make* someone go and see a certain movie (“If you don’t, my morally indignant friends will throw rocks through your window”).

The authority of a department meeting lies in the scrupulous following of agree-upon rules and the acknowledgement that at that meeting, by a majority vote, after a full discussion, the English Department decided to restrict the size of freshman classes to thirty-five.

What counts in such transactions is (we tell ourselves) simply the cogency of the arguing.

It’s not possible—well, not acceptable—to trick fellow department members into voting one way by withholding information or phrasing a motion ambiguously.

And at any point someone can ask further questions while trying to get things clear.

No-one can say, “Oh, they do that at Toronto and Queen’s, so we must too.” The present here-and-now discussion *is* the reality.

Nor can a speaker say, “Oh, that’s been proven by Derrida” (or Northrop Frye; or F.R. Leavis) and assume that that settles it. Any more than when he or she is discussing a novel with a colleague or with students in a seminar.

XI

In effect this is what might be called a Shakespearian model of discourse.

When we watch or read *Hamlet* or *Othello*, what happens is what happens *in* the play.

We don't look around for other characters or "forces" that are responsible for what happens: Othello's parents, say, or Scandinavian geopolitics.

The characters in front of us—Hamlet, Claudius, Othello, and the rest—are the characters responsible. We don't hunt for the real truth about them in what they *don't* say; and the outcome, the closure, is *their* closure.

The plays do not proceed on the assumption that the facts about honour or the workings of conscience have already been established. Nor do we assume that there is an authoritative, privileged speaker in each play.

We are reminded too of the possibility of someone's being utterly certain about the truth of something on the basis of what's been said to him (Othello *knows* that Desdemona's unfaithful to him)—and utterly wrong. And we can see how absurd would be an announcement, "The Danish Royal family feels that...."

Agonistic groups do not get converted into organic ones by sleight-of-tongue.

Henry V does not talk to his troops about what "England" expects of them. Nor does he say, "I am the King. Obey me!")

He tells them ("dear friends") what conduct befits honourable Englishmen in battle, himself included; and he asks them to go with him into the breach.

In effect he asks them to trust him; to see things as he sees them in his speech, and to act accordingly.

XII

But what are we doing when we feel that we can trust someone?

—that when they tell us something that has happened, there is a fair chance that what they're saying is true;

—that when they praise a novel to us, there's some likelihood that we too would find things to admire were we to read it;

—that when they suggest a course of action, their proposal may be worth attention?

What produces the feeling in us with respect to various difficult writers or works that it may be worth persisting with them?

Well, often, I think, such speakers display an awareness of the kinds of game-rules that I've been describing.

They tacitly acknowledge that there are no authorities, themselves included, whose dicta *settle* anything.

They tacitly recognize the problems of textuality and draw us into their own experience with the discourse of others.

They tell us how they tried to find out what was going on in the besieged capital; whom they talked to; what problems they had getting hold of a reliable government spokesman.

They give us some indication of how they read a text, whether a press release or a poem: their initial reactions, their puzzlements, their reservations.

They engage with other commentators—or other *kinds* of commentators—and with us.

They give us the feeling of being accessible to us; so that if we were to say, “What about so-and-so?” or “I'm not quite sure I...”, they would try to translate their arguments back into terms of shared discourse.

And they give us the impression that they are *thinking* their way through the issues that they are discussing.

The presence of such features has obviously contributed to the affection of many readers for Orwell as a political journalist, for the literary criticism of Leavis, and for how Wittgenstein, Austin, and Nietzsche do philosophy.

XIII

But of course there is more to the question of trust than that.

There is also the kind of commitment in discourse that is a *summons* to commitment. And there are *degrees* of commitment.

Most of the time we get along with a comfortable linguistic looseness when we talk with one another.

We have a functional acceptance of gestures and sketches: “‘She didn’t feel too well,’ ‘Oh, that’s a pity’”; “‘So you had a good time?’ ‘Oh yes, very nice, thanks.’”

We don’t normally follow up such statements with definition demands (“What does ‘too well’ mean? Can one ever be *too* well?”) or information demands (“Did you go swimming a lot? *Where* did you swim? Did you wiggle your fingers in the sand when you lay on your towel afterwards?”).

But there are times when we feel that someone is much more present in his words; that he is playing for real, and inviting us to do the same.

There is a large difference between someone’s signing his name on the attendance sheet at a department meeting and signing the American Declaration of Independence—pledging his life, his sacred honour, etc.

There’s a broad spectrum, too, with respect to how one “thinks” about something inside the privacy of one’s own head: the flickering spectral images of possible outcomes; the Joycean mutter of half-formed phrases like radio heard through bad static; the kind of full-voiced, fully committed statement to oneself (while reading some infuriating news item) that one would make aloud to a colleague or in a public forum.

And I need hardly recall the difference in feeling between “Oh, do we really *have* to go?” (to a party) and (between clenched teeth), “I *don’t* — *want* — to go!”

But what are we talking about here? What is it that draws one into an engagement, demands one’s attention, keeps one talking and listening and interrogating?

And when I speak of feeling, does this lead us back to the idea of a self hidden *behind* the words—a self to be “uncovered”?

I don’t think so. And here I must become a bit more technical and literary.

XIV

First of all, as one or two of my examples will have recalled, there is the crucial fact of emphasis and rhythm as a component of meaning, a *constituter* of meaning.

Let us say that I am trying to make out some very badly faded words in a manuscript; or testing my eyesight against the print-out messages on that very soothing silent TV channel: “I — never — gave — him — any — money.”

What do those words “mean”?

Well, there are at least eight distinct possible meanings when those words are used in spoken discourse:

- (1) “*I* never gave him any money” (meaning, “He may have got money from someone, but if so, it wasn’t from me”; *or*, “Even if someone else was foolish enough to give him money, *I* wasn’t”);
- (2) “I NEVER gave him any money” (not even once or twice);
- (3) “I never GAVE him any money” (though he may have TAKEN some); *or*
- (4) “I never GAVE him any money” (but I LENT him some);
- (5) “I never gave HIM any money”;

(6) “I never gave him ANY money”... ;

(7) “I never gave him any MONEY”... ;

(8) “I NEVER gave him ANY MONEY” (and I wish now that I had).

And this kind of nuancing and obliqueness—compounded, of course, by voice timbre, body language, and degree of verbal emphasis—bears on the promissory or invitational nature of spoken conversation.

XV

Often, as I’ve said, we know perfectly well what kind of response is being invited by a statement or question (“Oh yes, very nice, thanks”).

We “take” the meaning, one might say.

But at times it’s unclear what kind of response is appropriate, as with the nuanced “I’m not sure I’d tell *her*, if I were you,” or Iago’s “Ha! I like not that” when he and Othello see Cassio leaving Desdemona in Act III.

More meaning seems implied (or promised) than is stated; and there is a question as to what to do about it—which fork in the trail to take; how far to go.

Moreover, as one advances (if one decided to advance) one fork leads to another.

XVI

Two colleagues, let us say, are talking outside the library:

A (reflectively): “I think I may go and hear Blank’s talk tomorrow” (Blank being a campus luminary).

B (dryly): “Oh, really?”

A: “You won’t be going, I take it?”

B (tersely): “Nope!”

A: “Why not, if I might ask?”

B (emphatically): “*I will not serve.*”

A smiles wryly; closure.

A’s opening statement tacitly invites a variety of possible responses (“I may too,” for example; or, “It’ll probably be interesting”; or, “What do you want to hear *him* for?”).

B in his reply (“Oh, really?”) declines to make a commitment but signals coolness.

A’s next question (“You won’t be going, I take it?”), to which the literal answer is obvious, invites more comment but leaves the way open for a neutral closure (“I’ve got papers to mark”).

B nominally closes things off, but his brevity and tone (“Nope!”) signal that there’s more that he *could* say.

A accepts the invitation to ask for more explicitness, but acknowledges the warning signals.

B closes things off even more emphatically with his “I will not serve,” but obliquely answers A’s question, and might in fact be willing to expand his answer.

A—who recognizes the (somewhat ambiguous) allusion to Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist*—decides to let things stop there.

In its full context, the exchange might unpack to something like, on the one hand,

“I know you dislike Blank for political reasons, but he’s got an interesting mind, and it seems to me that we ought to be able sometimes to allow our intellectual concerns to override our political ones”;

and, on the other,

“I do indeed feel strongly about Blank, so strongly that I refuse to make a distinction between the quality of his mind and the authoritarian uses to which he puts it, or to engage in play-acting

civility. But I'm not going to inflict my reasons on you, unless you really want them, and I don't hold it against you that *you're* going to his talk."

XVII

Set down in cold print, the exchange would be more indeterminate in meaning, of course. (Think of the possibilities inherent in the various stressings of "Oh, really?").

But the meanings that I have ascribed to it are not wholly arbitrary, or dependent on a knowledge of the speakers, any more than they are in the various versions of "I never gave him any money."

Even statements taken entirely out of context bear *some* degree of context within them.

Each year I ask my freshmen to make inferences about the speakers of sentences like, "When I told Dad how I goofed that exam, he literally blew his top," and there's a good deal of agreement.

They've heard people saying things *like* this (perhaps have even said such things themselves), and know where to fit them in.

In the same way, we ourselves can successfully read a distinguished unfamiliar poem without needing to be briefed about its author's "thought", particularly when it's juxtaposed with distinguished poems by other writers.

And it is at such points that one can see the seamlessness of the transition from the spoken word to the printed—to "literature."

XVIII

When we deal with high-structure works, whether distinguished poems or distinguished political speeches, we are dealing with works in which a great deal of controlling and limiting of meaning goes on by means of syntax, rhythm, sequence, and so on.

Were the cashier at a supermarket check-out counter to say to us out of the blue, “Life’s such a walking shadow, isn’t it?”, we might very well raise our literal or figurative eyebrows.

But we don’t when Macbeth says:

To-morrow,
 and to-morrow,
 and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace
 from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death.

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.

And when one ponders the opening of Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium” and asks oneself whether it goes, “*That* is no country for *old* men” (but it is for young ones) or, “*That* is no country for *old men*” (as distinct from young human beings of both sexes), one has already ruled out “*That is* no country for *old* men”; and both syntax and metre suggest that “*old men*” is the correct stressing.

Which is why, of course, the commitment required of reading a poem aloud—or of hearing it precisely in one’s head—is so important.

But at the same time, with each seeming closure or narrowing of meaning (“Ah,” we think, “the thought has come to an end,” or “Ah, now I know how the thought is going to continue”), there’s a new opening up; a forking.

The thought (as embodied in syntax and metre) *hasn’t*, it transpires, been completed, and the next line (it’s often a matter of the pauses at the ends of lines) can take us in a direction we hadn’t quite been expecting, as if one thing that was said (and “felt”) *generated* another.

XIX

The seeming closures, and then continuations, were obvious enough in the *Macbeth* passage.

An in some ways more interesting process goes on in the eight-line opening stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium” with its ostensible four-square visual solidity, its not-quite-perfect rhymes, and its syntactical unbalancings.

That is no country for *old men*. [What isn’t?] The young [Do what?]

In one another’s arms [Do what?], birds in the trees [Do—what?]

—Those dying generations [Dying?]*—*at their song [Do—what?]*...*

We have the sensation of advancing into the not altogether known.

And though clarifications come, they are not *complete* clarifications, of the sort that tie things up neatly.

The wider-angle fourth line, “The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,” gives us the delayed identity of the country (Ireland), but in terms of a larger-than-life, an almost mythical plenitude. And with the temporary triadic closure of

Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies,

we seem to have a folk-wisdom (and biblically tintured) acknowledgement of the ongoing irresistible flow of natural processes.

But it *is* only a temporary closure. With the concluding, but still not perfectly rhymed, couplet,

Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unaging intellect,

we have a more individuated closure, in which the intellect that perceives that music is not merely abstract, and the dramatically positioned monuments not simply static.

And then (though I won't continue the analysis) there's the further forking—the leap—to the start of the next stanza, coming down hard on the depreciatory final word: “An aged man is but a paltry *thing*....” (“A tattered coat upon a stick, *unless* / Soul clap its hands and sing...”)

XX

What I am getting at will be clear by now

The meaning and feeling are there *in the words*.

The disposition to think of “real” poetic thinking and feeling as occurring behind or beyond the words of discourse obviously derives partly from our experience with Shakespearean soliloquies.

In a passage like “Tomorrow and tomorrow,” the metaphors are so rich, and succeed each other so rapidly, that one feels drawn beyond the words into receding and shifting vistas of implications and interconnections.

But if Macbeth's soliloquies are so convincing as examples of someone thinking, this is because how Macbeth speaks to himself in private is in accord with how he speaks to others. (We sense, correctly, that a person cannot move immediately from the highly voiced to the absolutely inchoate, or vice versa.)

And in Shakespeare's England the higher structurings of discourse, whether in political speeches, or the Church of England services (“We have erred and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep”), or private prayer to a Being to whom one may not lie, must have entered into and helped structure entirely “private” thinking.

But such thinking was not, on that account, any the less permeated with feeling. And to say that thinking and feelings in poetry—in *good* poetry—are inseparable from the words out there is not to speak of something emerging into visibility like toothpaste from a tube.

XXI

We have all had the experience of wrestling with a problematical letter to someone, scrapping draft after draft, and then having it come out right: “Dear Bill, I’m afraid that I simply cannot let you have another penny after this. Please treat this cheque as the last one. May and I wish you well, but we do not want to see you again.”

The “rightness” consists in one’s feeling that now one has said it right; that that *is* how one feels and means; that the reader will hear it said—said almost aloud—and grasp what one feels and means and realize that one *does* mean it.

The meaning and feeling are *there* at least for the writer, in a way that they weren’t before.

So too with poetry.

When Andrew Marvell concludes his “The Mower to the Glow-worms” with,

Your courteous lights in vain you waste,
Since Juliana here is come;
For she my heart hath so displaced
That I shall never find my home,

he is not offering an autobiographical statement of feelings behind the words.

He is *creating* feeling; creating something in which he and his readers can meet.

And when we read Louise Bogan’s “Exhortation” (I shall quote only the last twelve of its twenty lines), the correct thing to say is not, “I guess she was a very bitter person,” or “She must have been in a bitter mood when she wrote that,” or even, “It expresses bitter feelings,” but, “It’s a bitter poem.”

And when one tries to follow up that very loose description with a fuller one, one is likely to find the epithet dissolving and dispersing, as being of no *critical* use:

It is the dead we live among,
The dead given motion, and a tongue.

The dead, long trained to cruel sport
And the crude gossip of the grave;
The dead, who pass in motley sort,
Whom sun nor sufferance can save.
Face them. They sneer. Do not be brave.

Know once for all: their snare is set
Even now; be sure their trap is laid;
And you will see your lifetime yet
Come to their terms, your plans unmade—
And be belied, and be betrayed.

XXII

In distinguished literature there is simply more there, more given, more thinking and feeling going on *in* the words.

The words—their syntax, their rhythms, their associations—*are* the thinking and feeling.

As Ezra Pound said, “Great literature is... language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.” And unpacking it is invited *because* of that richness.

We sense a *Gestalt* or configuration that pulls us forward, that makes us aware of meanings there that we cannot articulate at first, but which we would like to enter into and take possession of, or be possessed by, so that we can feel the works from the inside.

And when a distinguished poem permits us to read it from start to finish with complete concentration, it consumes itself in the way that a conversation does. Which is why we can return to it again and again.

All this makes—or should make—us more aware of what we mean when we talk about the “minds” of writers (or of other people).

We are not talking about something homogeneous.

We are talking about what goes on in *this* poem—and this—and this.

And, given the wide variations in quality that can occur in a writer's work, and the variety of poetic languages that he or she may use, we can never presume to know automatically what goes on in one poem because of what goes on in others.

XXIII

All this is language—language as we experience it from the discourse exchanges of earliest infancy onwards.

It is the tidied-up, depersonalized, *monotone* languages of a good deal of science and science-minded philosophy that are the anomalies, the departures, the special sub-languages.

And language as I am describing it connects up with behaviour, potential or actual.

XXIV

It is sometimes intimated that because we live among—because our doings are permeated by—fictions, codes, conventions, games, the involvement of language with reality diminishes.

This gets things upside down.

XXV

In one sense language is indeed wholly arbitrary, as we're reminded when the old gentleman, asked by a child why noodles are called noodles, says, "Well, they *look* like noodles, and they *smell* like noodles, and they *taste* like noodles, so we call them noodles"; or when the German says, "I call this *Brot*," the Frenchman says, "I call this *pain*," and the Englishman says, "I call this *bread*—and it *is* bread!"

But it would not on that account make sense if someone, accosted by a park attendant for not having his dog on a leash, were to say, “Oh, that’s not a dog, that’s a *chien!*”

Conventions, once settled on, lock into the real world and have consequences. It is wholly conventional whether an ace of hearts is a high card or a low; but a fortune can be made—or lost—because one holds one.

And discourse, including literary discourse, obstinately meshes with behaviour and invites us to think about its truth-to-ness.

When one reads, for example, Louise Bogan’s poem “Solitary Observation Brought Back from a Sojourn in Hell”—a poem two words shorter than its title—one automatically does some connecting up:

At midnight tears
Run into your ears.

“Yes, that could happen... lying on your back... quite a lot of tears... lying rigid, I suppose, rather than curled up foetally... staring, maybe (if the light’s on), at the ceiling... not using a handkerchief... not caring about cosmetic attentiveness in the abandon of misery.”

And if one finds oneself asking whether one should say (as I had done hitherto) “Run *into* your ears,” which the metre seems to demand, or “*Run* into your ears,” one starts trying to fit the phrase to other situations and recall how one uses it oneself or has heard others using it: “The water ran into his shoes,” “I ran into them at a party,” “The car ran into a tree.”

In the same way, faced with a first-hand account of something vastly beyond one’s own experience, one can set it against accounts of things closer to one’s experience that feel true, and think, “Yes, if those appalling things had happened to me, that is how I myself might have described it.”

XXVI

And discourse can have consequences, sometimes major ones—sometimes *undesired* ones.

A preoccupied “Hi!” in passing can be wounding, given the different signals sent out by phrases like “Hi!” or “Hello! Lovely day, isn’t it?” with respect to degrees of closeness and liking.

The stub of a theatre ticket, a cryptic abbreviation in someone’s diary, a weather report are all “texts,” but when they’re interpreted and read together in the classic puzzler, they point inexorably to the fact and name of the person who shot the millionaire in his library.

A single word or turn of phrase can have consequences as explosive and ruinous as a minute slip of a scalpel during an operation.

Oscar Wilde was undone in his libel trial when he was asked if he had ever kissed a particular youth and he replied, “Oh dear no. He was a peculiarly plain boy.”

Othello is undone when he accepts the invitation to questioning in a handful of words by Iago and moves in a single scene, through a series of wilder and wilder forkings, from

Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee! And when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again,

to, “Oh! Blood, blood, blood!... Damn her, lewd minx!”

As a result of which, Desdemona dies at his hands, Othello dies by his own hand, Cassio is crippled, Roderigo murdered, Emilia murdered, and Iago put to death after torture.

In Shakespeare the movement from consequences to further consequences is inexorable.

There is no return of the same discourse attitudes as at the beginning of the play. No Polonius reappears after Hamlet’s death to talk about being true to oneself.

XXVII

Moreover, discourse contains an element of risk whenever one obtrudes oneself on the notice of others.

It is present in a cocktail-lounge “Hi there!” (““You look interesting to me, I hope I look interesting to you’—‘Get away, you creep!’”).

It is present when one engages in condolences, reprimands, pleas, encouragement, exhortation, and risks rebuff or resentment—risks appearing (and being) clumsy, insensitive, timid, callous, and so forth.

Some discourse in poetry is like that: “Once more into the breach dear friends, once more” (“Get stuffed!”); “This above all, to thine own self be true” (“Oh, *Daddy!*”); Kipling’s “If” (“Yecch!”); Pope’s *Dunciad* (“What a perfectly *horrid* little man!”).

But there is plenty of risk-taking in non-manipulative works too.

In her tears-at-midnight poem, Louise Bogan—who presumably appeared thoroughly composed in daily encounters—exposes herself as someone who has *been* there; and a good deal more occurs in her “Exhortation.”

Even a quiet poem like Hardy’s “In Time of ‘The Breaking of Nations’” (“Only a man harrowing clods / In a slow, silent walk”)—is a poem in which Hardy is consciously *not* saying and feeling in 1916 the politically correct, bugle-blowing, Defence-of-Civilization-As-We-Know-It things about the War.

Openings are particularly risk-filled, as they are in “real life” (such as when you want to start making peace with someone who’s mad at you).

Think of the daring success of openings like “They flee from me that sometime did me seek,” “Thou still unravished bride of quietness,” “April is the cruellest month”; and the disastrousness of “A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot.”

But transitions too can be problematical, with a dizzying gulf lying between point A and point B.

And it must be scary to know that the whole momentum of a poem that one is writing is going to culminate in a final line and a final *word*.

XXVIII

All this may have seemed like a long detour. But what I have been getting at are interconnections between authority, commitment, and plenitude of a *non*-infantilistic kind, whether in conversational, institutional, or literary discourse.

I have been pointing, in one way or another, to discourse situations involving progressions towards closure and commitment, large and small: going to that movie together, passing such-and-such a motion, publishing *this* draft on one's book, reading a line of verse aloud in a certain way.

I have been talking about the desire to feel that the closure reached is the right one—the best of the options—and that one will be able to defend one's decisions if challenged later.

I have been pointing to what might be called playing for real—acting with an acceptance of the possible consequences of one's acts, including how one reveals oneself in them.

When, for example, one writes, “Dear Bill, I'm afraid that I simply cannot let you have another penny after this” and feels that one *has* got it right, one has a feeling of plenitude—of being able to *speak* the words through with one's voice, one's face, one's whole body; a feeling of the other listening and responding in the desired way.

And with poems too there can be a feeling of the poet's having got it right, down to the finest metrical nuances, and being able to inhabit fully that saying; so that Yeats is more “there” in the published opening of “Sailing to Byzantium” than in an earlier version like, “Here all is young; the chapel walls display / An infant sleeping on His Mother's knees....”

Likewise one can feel at times that a legislative body or committee has gone about its business with maximum responsibility and scrupulousness; with a resultant moral authority even when one disagrees with the decision reached.

XXIX

As will be apparent by now, I have been juxtaposing two very different ideas of moral authority.

One is the claimed right to tell others what to do and think; the right of a claimed moral superiority or ideological correctness; a right effectively beyond argument; the right to command, to forbid, to *invade*.

The other is the demonstration of the kinds of qualities that dispose others to attend to what one says; not necessarily to agree with it, but to listen.

When someone we know to be an experienced woodsman says, “*Don’t step on that log!*”, we assume that something’s wrong there—rotten wood, a snake concealed.

And the authority of a critic in a brief aside about a novel, or a theologian quoted on the back of a dust-jacket, comes both from what else we may know of their work and from the feeling that, to judge from how they are speaking *now*, they have made a commitment, and that they could say more about the matter if asked.

It is natural to feel irritated, as I do, by the idea of the homogeneous sage exuding wisdom.

But there are pieces of discourse in which one encounters an impressive fullness of utterance, whether in the writings of critics like Leavis and Winters, or philosophers like Wittgenstein or (why not?) Plato’s Socrates.

And there are losses when the full voices are reduced to toneless texts which one can dismantle at one’s leisure.

There is a loss of the sense of distinguished minds at work out there, with their comforts and challenges that can make one feel, “I wish I were more like her” or “I wonder what he’ll say about *that* problem?”; and a loss, too, of a sense of the *time* required for growth and grasp.

It is because of that fullness that we desire, very properly, to go to the “source” of an idea, the text, whether by Hobbes, or Plato, or Marx, in which it is articulated and explored most fully.

It is because of that, too, that one is willing to keep working at trying to understand and come to terms with a difficult writer.

XXX

What are some of the implications of all this for a university, that source of so much of society’s thinking, and by far its most complex model of self-government?

I will be brief.

XXXI

We live and work, as academics and students, in a community with a very wide variety of kinds of discourse, some of them highly structured, in which we reach toward closure.

There is the kind of closure represented by the publication of an intensely worked-at book or article.

There are the ongoing closures of votes at meetings.

There is the kind of progression that occurs in a seminar discussion of some text or consequential problem, in which there is no vote and no consensus but everyone’s perceptions are different at the end from what they were at the outset.

And so on.

And these activities, in which we consider competing claims and opinions and accept some and reject others, all seem to me extensions of the patterns I have pointed to in one-to-one conversation, with its start-of-play initiatings, its signals, its forkings, its potentials for risk, its potentials for moving towards greater clarity, if only a greater clarity about what divides the speakers.

Insofar as genuine agreement occurs, there has been a successful, non-authoritarian coping with claims to “authority” (“My opinion on this point is *right*”).

And in so far as the participants have been able to bring themselves to a full and free commitment, what they do subsequently may have authority for others.

XXXII

It seems to me vital that such processes, whether in writing, or teaching, or legislating, be able to go forward freely.

In all of them, creative thinking involves moving from lower- to higher-definition formulations; from muddlings and explorings and interrogatings to conclusions that were not predetermined.

It involves a creative interplay between generalizing and particularizing, in which one tries both to see the broader aspects of particular experiences (like Yeats and Bogan passing beyond “I’m really feeling my age these mornings” and “What that reviewer said about me was *foul*”) and to see the implications of “abstract” formulae in terms of the experiences of individual consciousnesses.

And it necessitates feeling absolutely free to follow up and give voice to one’s glimpses of problems, contradictions, possible implications.

XXXIII

The blocking or aborting of such processes is of course a feature of certain kinds of madness, derangement, dread.

Typical voices, derived in part from real ones, invade one’s consciousness, interrupting the formation of statements in one’s head, challenging a word or phrase as it suggests itself.

So that there is an unstoppable clatter of half-discourse—of sensed but never fully formed, fully voiced, fully individuated accusations, in which each movement towards reply immediately sets off a further half-accusation.

And nothing is ever brought to closure: one never reaches the full-voiced mental dialogue in which one can achieve a full-bodied *committed* rebuttal or counter-challenge.

We are all aware, too, of the harm to a novelist or poet of being continually conscious of the possibility of censorship while he or she is writing.

By which I do not mean the awareness—part of the risk-taking process of committing oneself to print—that reviewers may attack the finished work.

I mean the awareness that other individuals have the power to demand—upon pain of punishment—that this or that passage be altered or excised for ideological reasons; or to deny the whole work circulation because the attitudes and beliefs in it are “offensive,” “socially unacceptable,” and so forth.

XXXIV

The same blockings and abortings can go on with academic writing and thinking, albeit more subtly.

And they do so because of the entry of authoritarianism into the discourse system of a university; which is to say, the privileging of some political beliefs over others, the assumption that all decent people share those beliefs, and the related assumption that not to share them is to be indecent.

That the truths beyond discussion, the facts that “everyone” knows, the things that have already been “proven” elsewhere—whether about nuclear disarmament, or Central American politics, or any of the other headline topics of the day—that these seek to entrench themselves in a university in the name of the highest virtues only makes them more dangerous.

For they bring with them a corrupting of the processes of truth-seeking thought to which we are supposedly dedicated.

They bring with them an authoritarian claim to power by individuals on the grounds of personal experience and politically correct belief.

They go against the central academic principle that if you want to prove a hypothesis, you do your best to see if it can be *disproved*, and the common-sense principle that what one reads and hears in a time of pandemic public lying is more likely than not to be inaccurate.

They ignore the fact that alternative and carefully argued academic discourse with respect to those unquestionable truths usually exists elsewhere.

And they bring with them a whole mess of Orwellian falsifications and skewings—the code-words or phrases that are not intended to be taken literally; the vague terms that are accorded a false precision; the replacement of spectrums by dichotomies; and the false antitheses by virtue of which to be opposed to something is to be presumed automatically to be in favour of its opposite.

XXXV

All this makes for slovenly argumentation and a naive deference towards “authorities”.

It creates a greater tolerance of lying and falsification (“Well, maybe he was a bit careless with his facts here and there, but what he said was *essentially* right. Let’s not be pedantic.”).

It makes harder the two-way process in which the patterns of public discussion can help structure the private thinking of individuals, and the best thinking of individuals can enter into public discussion and decision-making.

And the university as a self-governing body becomes functionally less intelligent and less efficient.

It also becomes a lesser university in a more fundamental way.

With their demands for instant acquiescence and submission, their practical rewards for those who subscribe to them, and their encouragement of the belief that politics and the pursuit of power are the only real reality, the entry of unarguable political truths into a university works against the slow processes of maturation and exploration, the refusal to make premature commitments, and the

evolution of a professional conscience in relation to the highest standards of thought, that seem to me the true professionalism.

XXXVI

Let me close with the aid of a final paradigm.

In Robert Graves and Alan Hodge's handbook about English prose, *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* (1943), the following dialogue (fact? fiction? at any rate theatre) is to be found; and I have been fond of it ever since I read it as a schoolboy forty years ago. It is headed, "From the Minutes of a Borough Council Meeting."

Councillor Trafford took exception to the proposed notice at the entrance to South Park: 'No dogs must be brought to this Park except on a lead.' He pointed out that this order would not prevent an owner from releasing his pets, or pet, from a lead when once safely inside the Park.

THE CHAIRMAN (COLONEL VINE): What alternative wording would you propose, Councillor?

COUNCILLOR TRAFFORD: 'Dogs are not allowed in this Park without leads.'

COUNCILLOR HOGG: Mr. Chairman, I object. The order should be addressed to the owners, not to the dogs.

COUNCILLOR TRAFFORD: That is a nice point. Very well, then: 'Owners of dogs are not allowed in this Park unless they keep them on leads.'

COUNCILLOR HOGG: Mr. Chairman, I object. Strictly speaking, this would prevent me as a dog-owner from leaving my dog in the back-garden and walking with Mrs. Hogg across the Park.

COUNCILLOR TRAFFORD: Mr. Chairman, I suggest that our legalistic friend be asked to redraft the notice himself.

COUNCILLOR HOGG: Mr. Chairman, since Councillor Trafford finds it so difficult to improve on my original wording, I accept. 'Nobody without his dog on a lead is allowed in this Park.'

COUNCILLOR TRAFFORD: Mr. Chairman, I object. Strictly speaking, this notice would prevent me, as a citizen who owns no dog, from walking in the Park without first acquiring one.

COUNCILLOR HOGG: (with some warmth): Very simply then: ‘Dogs must be led in this Park.’

COUNCILLOR TRAFFORD: Mr. Chairman, I object: this reads as if it were a general injunction to the Borough to lead their dogs into the Park.

Councillor Hogg interposed a remark for which he was called to order; upon his withdrawing it, it was directed to be expunged from the Minutes.

THE CHAIRMAN: I see Councillor Hogg rising quite rightly to raise another objection. May I anticipate him with another amendment: ‘All dogs in this Park must be kept on the lead.’

This draft was put to the vote and carried unanimously, with two abstentions.

XXXVII

Now, I can imagine some Council member or bureaucrat thinking irritably, “We all know what we want. Why make such a fuss about mere words?” (with a clear image in his or her head of the Park as it should be—pristine, pastoral, with no free-running dogs making messes and getting into fights); so that the debate ceases to *be*, for him or her, the present reality and becomes simply an obstruction in the conduit through which the correct future should be flowing.

But it seems to me that the discussants are behaving with an exemplary scrupulousness with respect to language.

The words at issue are *committed* words—assented to with full legal commitment; words to be painted on a notice board and prominently displayed; not just a chalk-scrawled admonition (“Yankees Go Home”).

Councillors Hogg and Trafford recognize the *power* of language; how the proposed statements are charged with meaning; how they mandate

action; and how they can carry within them some obviously undesirable action.

No one tells them to shut up and stop wasting Council's time, or says, "I think we should have faith in the good judgment of our officials," or drops dark hints about, "If Council knew what I know about dogs...."

And when Colonel Vine brings the discussion to a successful closure, it is not by virtue of his authority as chairman but because his own suggested wording is persuasive.

In fine, we have listened in upon a forum in which people are going about their proper business, free from moral intimidation, *ad hominem* arguments, and the pressure of foregone conclusions.

I suspect that, because of that freedom, things went better not only in the Park but in the Borough.

And I think that academics might have something to learn from Councillors Hogg and Trafford, and from Colonel Vine.

1987

In Defence of Language If It Needs It (1987)

Side D also instead from outside half... Craunch along to stanchion
14 at the mashing together plate... Farb now the glimrod.

Instructions in *Shoe* comic strip for assembling sleigh kit
(Dec. 19, 1982)

I

In the Penguin volume *Modernism* (1976), that fat and intimidating exercise in apologetics, there is a passage that has stayed in my mind and gone on nagging at me. It occurs in the article ‘The Crisis of Language,’ and goes as follows:

That which links thought with language, language with the external world, and man with man has disappeared. Like the mock tennis game at the end of Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*, all language games are felt to have become absurd because the ball, that which guarantees communication between subject and object, is lost. ¹

The passage doesn’t simply spring out of nowhere and bite you.

As with some of the more scandalous pronouncements of Paul de Man, the writer is describing what he takes to be the attitudes of others, among them Kafka (of whom the statement is surely untrue) and the fictional Chandos of Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s ‘Letter of Lord Chandos.’

But that, in a way, makes it all the more disturbing.

As Borges knew (‘I remember,’ observes his best-known fictional narrator, ‘that Menard used to declare that censuring and praising were sentimental operations which had nothing to do with criticism’), ² the reported opinions or discoveries of others can leave one peculiarly a-jangle.

And when assertions are absolute enough, one can have the queasy feeling that one may have been missing something—that one has been skating unawares on some very thin ice over some very cold deep waters.

II

To allay my own anxieties, I propose to look in a common-sense way at the question of communication and meaning losses.

I am aware that it is precisely common sense—what we assume we know, in contrast to how things ‘really’ are—that is being called into question. But I like Yvor Winters’ remark, apropos of a poem by J.V. Cunningham, that ‘I confess that I retain a kind of bucolic distrust of all theories which seem to be in conflict with the facts of life.’³

And we are sometimes too modest about testing out assertions, especially ones with an air of profundity, against the world as we ourselves experience it.

Obviously that world is a made as well as a given one, and some of it can be unmade. But it *is* partly a given one.

And to talk about language, as is sometimes done, as if an all-seeing sage or all-promising parent had turned out to be, not simply human and humanly imperfect, but a humbug and charlatan whose every move is suspect involves much too crude a dichotomizing.

I will be speaking, not too irritatingly I hope, of what “we” and “you,” as well as “one” and, occasionally, “I” feel about something. When someone like Lionel Trilling informs us about what “we” used to feel, I mostly think, well *I* didn’t. But I recognize the kind of audience that is implied there, and using the impersonal passive voice would be worse.

III

Non-communication, or *insufficient* communication, indeed occurs.

People lie or misdirect, like Iago—lie so skillfully at times that when in a trial there is a total conflict in testimony, we may be at a loss as to whom to believe.

And even when we have no reason to suspect lying, when two people offer different accounts of what happened when only the two of them were present, without any recording devices, there is no way of being certain about what in fact occurred. Any more than Borges’ obsessed

searchers in the Library of Babel can *know* which of the volumes contains the key to all the rest.

People can falsify in subtler ways, too, such as in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*:

“Water... Give me some water, please. It's over there!” I murmured in a weak voice, realizing very well at the same time that I could have managed without a drink of water and without murmuring in a weak voice. But I was, what is called, *play-acting* to save appearances, though my fit was real enough.⁴

They can be baffled by someone else's moves, like Fielding trying to cope with Professor Godbole in *A Passage to India*, or Alice *passim*.

They can have trouble “expressing” themselves. In Camus' *The Plague*, once the pestilence-ridden city has been sealed off,

People linked together by close friendship, affection, or physical love found themselves reduced to hunting for tokens of their past communion within the compass of a ten-word telegram. And since, in practice, the phrases one can use in a telegram are quickly exhausted, long lives passed side by side, or passionate yearnings, soon declined on the exchange of such trite formulas as, “Am fit. Always thinking of you. Love.”⁵

We know the frustration of talking to a deaf person and having to lose tones and nuances in our slowed-down shouting, or of trying to describe a vivid dream or any other intensely private and kinaesthetic experience.

We know how Marlow feels in *Heart of Darkness* when he bursts out to his silent hearers aboard the *Nellie*, “Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment....”

And if death is a country from which no traveller returns, its borders can start well this side of one's departure. In Tolstoy's “The Death of Ivan Ilych” (which should more properly be called “The *Dying* of Ivan Ilych”), Ilych in his increasing agony is conscious that “he had to live

thus all alone on the brink of an abyss, with no-one who understood or pitied him.”⁶

The more intense the experience, the greater the exasperation can be (“It is impossible to say just what I mean!”), given our hunger at such times for instantaneous communication: ““But surely you know what I mean?” ‘No, I *don’t* know what you mean. I don’t know what you’re *talking* about!’”

We have had ample reminders in literature of the destructiveness of marriages in which one partner can *never* convey to the other how he or she feels.

IV

There are always meaning-losses and leakages with respect to language.

Memories fade as one reads or listens, so that as the carpet unrolls in front of one, it partly rolls up behind

When we arrive at those five “Never’s” in *King Lear*, we do not have in our heads everything that has preceded them, any more than we retain all of the Odessa Steps sequence in *Battleship Potemkin* by the time we see the close-up of the sabred bourgeoisie.

There are limits, as E.D. Hirsch reminds us, to the precision with which we can retain the syntax of a sentence as it unfolds;⁷ and to the length of a line of metred verse that one can retain *as* a line, a repeatable unit.

What we hear as we write—the pausings, the stressings, the tonality—can never be exactly what our readers hear. Nor, when we speak, will our auditors hear the same voice that we ourselves hear inside the resonating boxes of our skulls. Before sound recording, no writer ever knew how he or she sounded when reading his or her work aloud, and it is obvious even now that many of those who do make recordings are very imperfect executants.

V

Language also has its peculiar puzzlements and bafflings, given what Camus calls our “nostalgia for unity,” our “appetite for the absolute.”⁸

Near the end of Graham Greene’s *Our Man in Havana*, when Wormold’s elaborate structure of espionage fictions has been shown up for what it is, Beatrice tells him how, at the informal board of enquiry,

“Nobody got really touchy until the Service reports came up. There was one about disaffection in the [Cuban] Navy and another about refuelling bases for submarines. The Commander said, ‘There must be some truth in these.’

“I said, ‘Look at the source. He doesn’t exist.’ ‘We shall look such fools,’ the Commander said.”

Far from words being weightless, we have an instinctive and very hard to shake disposition to feel that there must be *some* truth to them, that they must in some way correspond to something.

As Socrates says, “The awe which I always feel, Protarchus, about the names of the gods is more than human—it exceeds all other fears.”⁹

In an anecdote that reveals more than he may have intended about his own procedures as a teacher of poetry, Stanley Fish has told us how one of his classes confidently explicated as a poem a cluster of names of scholars that had been left unerased on the blackboard from a previous class.¹⁰

The possibility that a collocation of words, like that which Tristan Tzara assembles from scraps of paper drawn from a hat in Tom Stoppard’s *Travesties*, is *not* charged with meaning is peculiarly difficult to live with. We seek automatically for *some* relationship, progression, and intention, in the spirit of Borges’ Kabbalists who believe that nothing in a text could be other than what it is. We try, with the King of Hearts, to fill in, or flesh out, the poem in *Alice in Wonderland* that begins,

They told me you had been to her,
And mentioned me to him:

She gave me a good character,
But said I could not swim.

VI

And we hunger for certainty—ultimately, the kind of certainty in which a mass of disparate phenomena come together in a small compass and can be controlled, like the dwindled, hold-it-in-your-hand, blue-and-white globe of space photographs.

As Camus says, “The mind’s deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man’s unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity.”¹¹

We feel that each “process word” we use as we write—“understand,” “know,” “communicate,” etc.—should have a clear meaning, a real referent, an absolute antithesis.

We want language to condense into super-meaningful words—“real,” “beautiful,” “natural,” “objective,” “progressive,” and so on—that we can use definitively when we praise or condemn something.

We desire words which, like those paper flowers in shells that opened up magically in our youth when put into a glass of water, are infinitely expandable into a whole true system of relationships out there.

Borges knew all about that sort of thing. So did Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s Lord Chandos when he spoke of his earlier aspiration to decipher fables as “the hieroglyphs of a secret, inexhaustible wisdom.”¹²

VII

Hence our dreads and anxieties when language goes awry and doesn’t “work” for us.

We are like the five-year-old (myself) who asked the workman whether he didn’t burn himself with the blow-torch and was told straightfacedly, “No, I’m too green.” (Grown-ups tell the truth, Bill is a grown-up, therefore he doesn’t burn himself, therefore he must be green; but he *isn’t* green!)

Or like Alice in one of her exchanges with the Mad Hatter when she “felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter’s remark seemed to her to have no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English.”

Faced with Bernard Russell’s famous illustrative statement “The present King of France is bald,” one can have for a moment the odd sensation that if one turned one’s suddenly one would catch sight of that figure whose existence one has somehow or other forgotten.

(Well, *I* did, anyway.)

We go on being bothered by statements like “This is not a pipe,” written below Magritte’s painting of what surely (surely?) *is* a pipe.

Or “This is not a sentence.” Or the words—the *only* words—on a notice board in a *Punch* cartoon a good many years ago: “Do Not Throw Stones At This Board.”

And of course there is that “giddy whirling” (Camus’ phrase) induced by the arguings and counterarguings about statements like, “No Cretan ever tells the truth. I am a Cretan.”

Or the even giddier ones induced by Mallarmé at his most elusive, as in “Un Coup de Dés,” with its ostensibly high degree of physicality—waves, gulfs, etc.—that never coheres into a three-dimensional Gestalt.

VIII

The conflicting imperatives at work in such encounters can bring one to a state of paralysis verging at times on panic, and to a feeling of profound uneasiness about language, as if one had suddenly stumbled upon its *real* nature.

It is like the malaise that afflicts some of us each spring with respect to those most basic texts, the first four and the sixth letters of the alphabet.

Faced with one’s inability to decide whether a particular freshman deserves a final mark of B- or C+—an inability that intensifies the longer one stares at the irregular pattern of marks in one’s mark book—one starts dissolving into a welter of scepticism about reading,

evaluation, and one's ability to know anything about anyone else's mind.

And the harder one struggles, the worse it gets.

It is like what happens when you decide that you will be decisive—decisive!—and clear away the mess on your office desk.

What could be simpler than putting a piece of paper, a *mere* piece of paper, in a manila folder?

But inevitably you end up with a residue of items whose “essential” nature you cannot determine—is this a personal letter? a policy document? a piece of literary theorizing?—and back they go onto one's desk, to be brooded over again at the *next* tidying-up.

Nevertheless, we manage. We do not disappear into the abyss for ever.

IX

When we talk about understanding or not understanding a word, a phrase, a piece of discourse, there is indeed a zero, such as when one says, “I don't understand Hungarian.”

Faced with a text in Hungarian, one can do *nothing* with it; one cannot go on at all. Just as one cannot set the timer on one's new VCR because one doesn't understand the instructions.

But while the alternative to not understanding the instructions about the timer can indeed be a total understanding (“Aha! Now I see how to set it!”), one can understand Hungarian a little, or quite a bit, or a lot.

And when we say that we have trouble understanding a poem or what someone is saying to us, we are not saying that we don't have the equivalent of bilingual fluency in Hungarian, as if that were the only alternative to being totally ignorant.

We do not assume that because there is a spectrum of “better” and “worse” communication, there must therefore be *perfect* communication; and that in contrast to that, actual communication is not simply imperfect but valueless.¹³ Any more than one assumes that if the brilliance of Torvil and Dean is one of the norms to which other

figure skaters now aspire, anything less than such brilliance must be viewed in terms of a “loss” of worth.

And when we say emphatically, “I know he was at the party. I saw him there,” we are not claiming that there’s an absolute called knowledge, and that we have it, so that our statements *must* be believed.

We’re not ruling out the theoretical possibility of hypnotism, memory lapses, brilliant impersonations, a mass conspiracy to deceive. As readers of detective fiction, science fiction, and the like, how could we? We’re saying that when we play back the party in our mind—the bodies, clothes, doings, and conversations—he keeps coming up *there*. Which is why maintaining a lie under intensive interrogation can be difficult.

If in fact we *didn’t* talk to him, it can be very difficult to maintain the kind of multi-perspectival grasp of the occasion that will enable all the recalled facts and fictions to be consistent with each other.

X

And communicating goes on all the time. People understand what others are saying, and are enlightened, entertained, angered by it.

In Beckett’s *Happy Days*, Winnie, buried up to her waist in sand, tells Willie, sitting silent behind her, “[J]ust to know that in theory you can hear me even though in fact you don’t is all I need, just to feel you there within earshot and conceivably on the qui vive is all I ask”

Plays like *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are a succession of committed exchanges in relationships which, however thinned out and tenuous, persist and are maintained.

The dreadful families in Pinter’s *The Homecoming* and Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are linguistic communities in which the participants can only be fully alive when they are being verbally beastly to one another.

Even the novels of Sade, that philosopher of the body, are novels of people *talking* to each other—working at communicating and having their opinions and feelings known, understood, accepted, approved of.

And when one is having a leisurely, rambling, late-night phone conversation with an old friend, one doesn't ask oneself, "But are we *really* communicating?"

There may indeed be gulfs between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, but their communicatings, often unvoiced, provide some of the most moving passages in fiction:

Then, knowing that he was watching her, instead of saying anything she turned, holding her stocking, and looked at him. And as she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him. He could not deny it. And smiling she looked out of the window and said (thinking to herself, Nothing on earth can equal this happiness)—

"Yes, you were right. It's going to be wet tomorrow. You won't be able to go." And she looked at him, smiling, for she had triumphed. She had not said it, yet he knew.

As Rousseau kept affirming, there is no happiness like that of a relationship in which one does not constantly have to conceal things or keep pulling back from boundaries that one knows one mustn't cross.

Anne Elliot's happiness with Captain Wentworth at the end of *Persuasion* is obviously of that order, as are the happinesses into which Shakespeare's couples exit at the end of the comedies after establishing a discourse of mutual respect and enjoyment. So, presumably, was that of the newly married Cheyenne couples who, as recalled to the naturalist George Bird Grinnell, would lie awake all night talking.¹⁴

The philosopher-classicist Martha Nussbaum has noted "the perceived similarity between the responsiveness of lovemaking and the responsiveness of good conversation."¹⁵ Even in Sade, characters work at establishing linguistic trust and a shared enjoyment of aesthetic and philosophical speculation, beyond the encounters of the body.

In contrast, we see in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* how a certain kind of Romantic was inevitably in for a bitter disillusionment when the yearned-for blank of a spiritual union with a "beautiful soul" was

replaced by minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour, day-by-day living together with a flesh-and-blood *talking* woman of limited education and intelligence.

XI

In some ways, indeed, we are not isolated *enough* from others for our own comfort.

As *Hamlet*, that quintessential play of discourse, reminds us, if we labour at finding out truths about others, and at preventing them from finding out truths about ourselves, it is because such findings-out can in fact occur.

Part of our dread of exposure when we are being insincere comes from our consciousness of how easy it can be to read body-English, tones of voice, and other linguistic clues. “I’m terribly sorry!” one says—but one isn’t, and it shows. At times one may even *want* it to show. As one of the actors in the original production of *The Homecoming* said, “One thing this play is not about is non-communication. These characters know only too bloody well how to communicate.”¹⁶

XII

And we live all the time with acceptable loosenesses and oddnesses in discourse, just as one can live with an imperfect knowledge of French when reading Rimbaud or Villon with the aid of translations and dictionaries.

One doesn’t feel in the presence of a mystery as one makes one’s way through Valéry’s “Le Cimetière Marin,” dictionary in hand, and finds, when one looks up the word “*juste*” in the lines

Ce toit tranquille, où marchent des colombes,
Entre les pins palpite, entre les tombes;
Midi le juste y compose de feux
La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée!

that the following are all listed as meanings of the word: “Just, equitable, rightful, righteous; justifiable, permissible, fair, legitimate,

lawful; proper, fit, apt, appropriate, apposite; right, true, accurate, exact; sound; well-fitting; tight.”

Nor is one brought to a standstill by the formal identity of sentences like “I went out for an hour,” “I went out for a drink,” “I went out for a quart of milk.” When someone says that a former colleague of hers was a pig, we don’t wonder whether he went “Oink! Oink!”

We can live with the fact that a courtroom verdict of “Not Guilty” does not necessarily mean that the person isn’t guilty, and with the legal fiction that when a husband and wife go off a cliff in their car, the husband dies first.

Nor are we normally disturbed by the fact that there is no innate connection between a word and the thing it refers to— that there is nothing innately bready about the English noise “bread” or the French noise “*pain*.” Any more than those small nineteenth-century American settlements—Cairo, Syracuse, Troy, Athens, etc.—somehow magically acquired some of the properties that their founders, with an eye on civic development, sought to confer on them.

And the reader is likely to nod approvingly when Mallarmé tells us that “the diversity of idioms on the earth prevents anyone from producing words which would bear the direct imprint of Truth incarnate. This is Nature’s own proscription....”¹⁷

Part of the pleasure of the Alice books is that by and large we ourselves know what to do with the rich variety of language puzzles that Alice is confronted with.

XIII

If language is ineluctably contextual and, outside of the limited jargons of science, the law, and so forth, multivalent, this is not cause for alarm. On the contrary, it is what enables us to keep going, provided that we do not make the wrong demands or ask the wrong questions.

As Kathleen Mansfield said in a letter shortly before her death, “I am so sick of all this modern seeking which ends in seeking. *Seek* by all means, but the text goes on ‘that ye shall find.’ And although, of

course, there can be no ultimate finding, there is a kind of finding by the way which is enough, is sufficient.”¹⁸

We know what it means not only to work toward greater precision and limited closures but to achieve them.

We do not constantly construct equal-status, equal-value fictions.

Rather, we construct hypotheses which may require modification in the light of what we learn subsequently, or may be proven to be simply wrong, but which for the time being are all we have. In Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.’s words, “Every year if not every day we have to wager our salvation upon some prophecy based upon imperfect knowledge.”

19

We tend, of course, when encountering a word or phrase in the course of a narrative to fill it in to the maximum.

When one reads in the paper a reference to something that makes one’s blood boil—“seventy-eight cases of child-abuse in a single month in a town of three thousand people”—one’s mind overleaps the processes of discourse (allegations, interrogations, proclamings, etc) to physical facts that are simply “there,” immediately and shockingly, before the mind’s eye.

And one can be remarkably trusting with respect to people’s powers of disinterested total recall, to judge from the frequent quoting of passages of “verbatim” dialogue by biographers and critics.

The tendency to fill something out is obviously part of an essential human programming.

If one is out hunting with a friend and he yells “Duck!” in a tone of pleasurable excitement, one immediately scans one’s segment of sky. Likewise, if one is on a construction site and someone yells “Duck!”, one does not start thinking about semantic ambiguities (or wish one had a shotgun), one *ducks*.

And one fills out the words when one reads, for example, “I turned my head and saw a fin cutting through the water towards me,” or “At the entrance to the innermost chamber of the tomb were two huge stone dogs.”

Since childhood we have been acquainted with flesh-creeping shark stories, and we immediately locate below the fin a fearsome creature whose size and full configurations (Hammerhead? Great White?) we do not know but of which we fear the worst.

But the fin may turn out to have been that of a dolphin, and we do not feel any ontological malaise. Nor do we feel any if we subsequently learn or figure out that “dogs” should have been “gods”—that it was a typo or a copyist’s error. Given the context, and the presence of obvious typos earlier in the text, we may already have suspected something was wrong. Which is to say that we’re tacitly aware that we’re reading hypothetically and provisionally, and that hypotheses can be false.

XIV

Or take a more literary example,

Mallarmé’s “Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire” opens with the words

Le temple ensevelis divulgue par la bouche
Sépulchrale d’égout bavant boue et rubis
Abominablement quelque idole Anubis
Tout le museau flambé comme un aboi farouche.

In the first Penguin selection of Mallarmé’s work this is translated in prose as follows:

The buried temple gives forth by the sewer’s sepulchral mouth,
slobbering mud and rubies, abominably some idol of Anubis, the
whole muzzle ablaze like a wild howl.²⁰

Mud and rubies in a sewer? What could have brought about such a conjunction, made even nastier in T.S. Eliot’s “Garlic and sapphires in the mud/ Clot the bedded axle-tree”?

Well, in *Les “Tombeaux” de Mallarmé*, Gardner Davies offers us at considerable length, and in a way that seems to me both scrupulous and convincing in its attention to Mallarmé’s linguistic habits, a reading that leaves one contemplating an archeological trench leading

down to the entrance of an Egyptian temple containing treasure, with the golden muzzle of a statue of the dog-headed god Anubis flaring in the light of a burning torch.

We have lost a mystery, as we have with Wesley Trimpi's argument that in Nashe's "Adieu, farewell earth's bliss," the line "Brightness falls from the air" in fact refers to the belief that comets presaged sickness.²¹ But the fragmentary, strobe-lighting effect of Mallarmé's poem is still there, as it is in the glimpses of the city prostitute in the second quatrain.

And the associations of sewers, and the sense of problematic disjunctions and disclosures—for this is a poem about Baudelaire, not about archeology—still remain and must be reckoned with; must still be adjusted to their subject.

The shift in meaning is not a *total* shift (the ghosts aren't there, the governess is mad and bad), but a partial one, and a recombining.

And again there is nothing ontologically disquieting about all this.

One hypothetical reading, in which "égout" simply translates as "sewer," has been replaced by another that feels a good deal more persuasive, and in keeping with the differences between the final and the less metonymic earlier version of Mallarmé's "Le Pitre châtié."

XV

This mode of reading seems to me radically different from the kind which assumes that the poet *must* be filling a term with the maximum meaning and thus laying him- or herself open to a rigorous challenge.

Yeats' "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" opens with the words, "I know that I shall meet my fate/ Somewhere among the clouds above."

Know? Precognition??

But when one says that one foresees disaster, or that one just *knows* that someone's going to be late, one is affirming a strong belief about the future, not claiming a supernatural prescience.

Yeats's poem is about someone's imagined attitude toward the likelihood of his own death in the high-mortality aerial combat over the World War I trenches.

XVI

Some of the puzzlings and self-perplexings about figurative language seem a good deal overdone, too.

We do not begin with a base of literal language that is the "real" form of language, and then find ourselves contemplating the mysteriousness of other kinds of language and feeling under a compulsion to explain and defend them.

Discourse, the totality of discourse as we start entering it in infancy, is ineluctably figurative.

And the kind of academic philosopher who worries—or mimics worry—about how it is we can say that someone has a chip on his shoulder when he visibly doesn't, and who impatiently brushes aside the intimation that the phrase has a history (as do illogicalities like the colloquial "I could care less"), seems to me to be trapped in an As If game of his or her own devising.

We live and move and have our being in a world where we *look into* problems, and *take up* questions, and *put off* unwelcome tasks;

—where researchers have their various *fields*, and difficulties are *highlighted*, and people's *viewpoints* differ;

—where a promising-looking career turns out to be a *flash in the pan*, and irritating colleagues have *chips on their shoulders*, and we are *on tenterhooks* when we are waiting for an important decision;

—where the *Crown* prosecutes perjurers, and people on Sundays express the hope that they will receive their *daily bread*.

Even if we lose sight of what the words are literally saying until it's recalled to our attention ("Dad, you've got a chip on your shoulder." "No I don't, he *did* behave badly—Oh, I see what you mean'," and he

brushes off the traces of his carpentry), we still know the distinction between literalness and figurativeness.

XVII

And for the most part we know how to use such terms even if we don't know that the pan in that phrase is the pan next to the touch-hole of a flint-lock gun, or that a tenter (as I see from my dictionary) was, and for all I know still is, "a frame on which cloth is stretched after having been milled, so as to dry evenly without shrinking."

We know the difference between the somewhat immature having of a chip on the shoulder, and the more purposeful and risk-taking throwing down of the gauntlet.

In his invaluable discussion of English idioms, Logan Pearsall Smith reminds us, with abundant examples, how the function of idioms (so often figurative)

is to bring back ideas from the understanding to the sensations from which they were originally derived; to reincorporate them again in visual images, and above all in the dynamic sensations of the human body, its members, its attitudes and acts.

Even if one doesn't know that the phrase "taken aback" was "originally used of square sails suddenly pressed against the mast by a head wind,"²² when one uses it one is still describing an abrupt loss of momentum. And when someone else says, "I was really taken aback by her answer," one's body is likely to recoil incipiently in sympathy.

And one's amused by the physicality of mixed metaphors, like Orwell's fascist octopus singing its swan song or the freshman whose eyes (by his own account) fell on his plate and roamed around the room.

XVIII

We are aware that metaphors, like similes, involve comparisons—selective comparisons, not assertions of identity—and that metaphors in large part can be expanded into non-figurative comparisons.

(“He was always alert, in a rather immature way, for occasions to take offense, like one of those nineteenth-century American kids who’d swagger around with a chip of wood on their shoulders and dare anyone to knock it off, with a fight ensuing if they did.”)

We know how to translate—what points to select—when Gully Jimson in *The Horse’s Mouth* recalls that it was “raining bayonets and fishhooks,” and why it is highly unlikely that Cary considered writing “telescopes and toothbrushes.”

No quasi-mystical assertion of identity is being made in such a phrase, or in Macduff’s “What, all my pretty chickens, and their dam,/ At one fell swoop?”

With lightning speed we sense, or feel, or “see” the cardinal points in the comparisons—the sharp, hard, driving-downwards of the rain, piercing one’s clothes and bouncing up from the sidewalk; the merciless plunge of the falcon on its defenceless prey.

And when we are brought to a halt by a metaphor like Dylan Thomas’s “Turning a petrol face blind to the enemy,” it is because we can’t see *any* points of resemblance, any more than we can when the White Knight tells Alice, “You see the wind is so *very* strong here. It’s as strong as soup.”

Moreover, analogical discourse may be more stable than ostensibly more precise speech, just as what may at first look like synecdoche (“I cried, ‘A sail, a sail!’”) may in fact be a more accurate description of what went on.

One does not, at a great distance, see a brig or barquentine or ketch. One sees a single patch of whiteness or redness—”A sail!”

Likewise, a statement like “A rolling stone gathers no moss” is literally true, as well as being more effectively communicative than the elaborate and clumsy unpacking that would be required (as with the chip-on-the-shoulder statement) to translate it into a “literal” statement about someone.

XIX

Some mysteries simply go away *as* mysteries when we look at them more carefully.

Marlowe's puzzlement over what it was that kept the presumed cannibals on the riverboat from snacking off the unlovely whites with whom they are sharing it can be cleared up by straightforward cultural explanations that were unavailable to Conrad at the time.

And if one strains in vain for the sudden illumination in which the fragments composing a particular freshman are "there" in a way that tells one beyond question what mark that student deserves, this does not reveal our essential unknowability to one another and the impossibility of marking *any* student fairly.

One gives a lot of marks without anxiety, and some with pleasure, particularly to graduate students.

And this is not because one has a different kind of knowledge about them.

One simply knows *more*, recalls more, has more to go on: the student is more fully *there* for one as manifested in this long and intelligently witty paper, those seminar discussions, those private conversations, the opinions of colleagues.

One also has a clear enough sense of the rules of the game—of what a first-rate performance looks like, and how this particular student is likely to go on performing.

So that even though there is no innate connection between a performance and a letter of the alphabet, and though people may disagree strongly in their assessments, marking is still possible, and one can do it with reasonable confidence in one's judgments.

XX

Sometimes too, as Ezra Pound pointed out, the puzzle lies not in what is said but in why someone has said it.

Faced with the “Do Not Throw Stones At This Board” cartoon, one becomes drawn into the problem of what is—or might be—going on in someone’s head as he or she paints those words on the board or directs someone else to do so and set the board up.

But one does not go all the way with alternative hypotheses (an English eccentric, a wit, etc).

Recognizing that the cartoon is meant to be funny, one as it were allows the board to sit there solemnly as the ultimate officious prohibition, capping admonitions like “No Loitering” and “Keep Off the Grass”, with an agreeable kind of mysteriousness to its opacity and underlying illogic.

XXI

And if the Cretan paradox is disturbing, this is largely because of an odd ascription of magical powers to language.

Faced with an actual Cretan who said at dinner, “Cretans never tell the truth, you know,” one wouldn’t be bothered for a moment, any more than one would be if a Cypriot said, “Oh, you shouldn’t believe *him!* Cretans always lie!”

One would simply expand their statements into more literal ones.

But lurking in the professional philosopher’s use of the “Cretan” statement is the idea of a kind of science-fictional society in which “no one” ever tells the truth.

One could live with that idea too, at least if one didn’t think too closely about it. (“Would you like some more wine?” “No thank you.” “I won’t give you any, then.” “Ugh, it tastes like horse-piss!” etc, etc.)

But faced with the flat out-of-context statement, one has the nerve-jangling sensation of confronting a mysterious alien being (a Cretan/a Venusian/ a Cyborg) that simultaneously can never tell the truth, just as stones can never fall upwards, and yet *is* telling the truth, given what we’ve agreed to accept as the nature of his/her/its society.

Moreover, one partly *wants* the statement to be simultaneously true and false, just as one wants a conjuring trick to be “impossible” and yet

happening before one's eyes; wants the pane of glass to be a solid pane and the conjurer's wand to be passing through it.

One wants the Cretan's statement to be true of every other statement by him, so that a logical trap can then be sprung, like the trap the clever dwarf springs when he points out at the end of the awesome performance by the strongest man in the kingdom that there's one thing in the palace that he *can't* lift, namely himself. In effect, we've allowed the Cretan's words to *create* that society.

XXII

But in doing so we were being too hasty, and were thinking of that society too much in our own terms.

In a society of straightforward linguistic substitutions and reversals, someone who said "No" when asked if he or she would like more wine would not *be* lying. Everyone would know what he or she meant, and he or she would be given more wine.

And if we try to hypothesize a society in which lying means successfully *fooling* others, a totally lying society would be impossible, both operatively and linguistically.

If wine could never even be *called* wine—as in “Would you like some more feathers?” “No, I don't like pebbles”—nothing could have a real name at all, not wine, not feathers, not pebbles, and there couldn't be either lies or truths.

The famous puzzle-statement, which boils down to “*I never tell the truth,*” belongs with other anomalies, such as the self-referential “This statement is a lie” or Gertrude Stein's “A jack in kill her, a jack in, makes a meadowed king, makes a to let.” Which is to say, on the margin.

The clever dwarf's intervention doesn't affect the strong man's ability to lift *almost* everything in the palace.

XXIII

For the most part, weighted though such language-puzzlings may become in power-charged philosophy seminars or journals, we are concerned with how language *does* connect up with the world of flesh-and-blood individuals and actions, rather than with how it doesn't.

We are concerned to *stabilize* the world as we inhabit it; to reach out and grasp things.

When we are involved in giving marks, or in departmental or faculty legislating, we are engaged in a double reaching:

—reaching back toward the past and trying to vivify for ourselves how people behaved then and how we felt and judged them;

—and reaching forward, in imagination, to how people are liable to behave further down the road, ourselves included.

If it is harder to make decisions when one is tired, this is because it is harder to imagine or envision their consequences: what so-and-so will feel when he reads such-and-such a paragraph in a letter to him; what it will be like next year when one is looking for a document that one has filed in this folder rather than that.

XXIV

Furthermore, if things go less than perfectly, this doesn't mean that they don't go at all.

Memories may be fallible—at times may virtually give out altogether —, and Beckett is entertaining about conflicting memories in *The Old Tune*:

GORMAN: Mrs. Cream must be a proud woman too to be a grandmother.

CREAM: Mrs. Cream is in her coffin these twenty years Mr. Gorman.

GORMAN: Oh God forgive me what am I talking about, I'm getting you wouldn't know what I'd be talking about, that's right you were saying you were with Miss Daisy.

CREAM: With my daughter Bertha, Mr. Gorman, my daughter Bertha, Mrs. Rupert Moody.

GORMAN: Your daughter Bertha that's right so she married Moody, gallous garage they have there near the slaughter-house.

CREAM: Not him, his brother the nursery-man.

GORMAN: Grand match, more power to you, have they children?

23

But the two old codgers are not simply following separate and conflicting tracks, like the talking-together of young children.

Nor are they indifferent to the idea of truth, like various of Pinter's characters.

And we are not trapped in the kind of predicament created by the no-ghosts theories about *The Turn of the Screw*, wherein once one has decided that the narrator may be grotesquely in error, there is absolutely no way of telling which of her recollections are accurate.

Gorman and Cream are collaboratively re-assembling the past, with corrections, adjustments, and persisting differences, a process that they enjoy.

And Beckett stands with writers like Joyce, and Yeats, and Hardy in his poems, and Proust, as one of the great modern celebrators of recollecting and of the stabilizings in our mental present that it makes possible.

XXV

Even where recalled verbatim speech is concerned, one can have what feels like accuracy. "I was walking once with Wittgenstein," Leavis wrote forty years later,

when I was moved, by something he said, to remark, with a suggestion of innocent enquiry in my tone: “You don’t think much of most other philosophers, Wittgenstein?”—“No. Those I have my use for you could divide into two classes. Suppose I was directing someone of the first to Emmanuel,”—it was then my college—“I should say: ‘you see that steeple over there? Emmanuel is three hundred and fifty yards to the west-south-west of it.’ That man, the first class, would get there. Hm! Very rare—in fact I’ve never met him. To the second I should say: ‘You go a hundred yards straight ahead, turn half-left and go forty’ ... and so on. That man would ultimately get there. Very rare too; in fact I don’t know that I’ve met *him*.” Thereupon I asked, referring to the well-known young Cambridge genius (who was to die while still young): “What about Frank Ramsay?”—“Ramsay? *He* can see the next step if you point it out.”²⁴

That feels *true*.

XXVI

Moreover, closures can be reached, whether in detective novels, or when a hacker tracks down information through a computer.

Closure can be reached with the context-specific *mot juste*, literary or otherwise.

When Edmund Burke, at the close of one of his perorations, threw down a dagger on the floor of the House of Commons, Richard Brinsley Sheridan enquired dryly, “Where’s the fork?”

Marlow finds the right words when he is out in the bush at night alone with Kurtz: “‘You will be lost,’ I said—’utterly lost’.”

In psychiatry, the patient can experience a sense of release and relief when his or her words suddenly redefine something and get it “right”: “No, I *didn’t* love him. I hated him. He terrified me. I was glad when he died.”

And in writing there are those times of free-flowing quick connectings when, as J.V. Cunningham puts it in “Coffee,”

Insight flows in my pen.
I know nor fear nor haste.
Time is my own again.

XXVII

Some closures are irrevocable, too.

A tiny conjunction of movements by the tongue, the larynx, and the diaphragm, or the barest twitch of a finger, can be weighted with the gravest consequences, like the slip of a scalpel during an operation.

A single breathed “Yes” (“Did you *sleep* with her?”) can wreck a marriage. A nod, the tiniest Judas movement of the eyes towards where the Resistance leader is hidden, can doom him or her to an appalling death.

Or someone can be saved.

At the climax of the trial in *A Passage to India*,

“The prisoner followed you, didn’t he?” he repeated....

“May I have half a minute before I reply to that, Mr. McBryde?”

“Certainly.

[Adela’s] vision was of several caves. She saw herself in one, and she was also outside it, watching its entrance, for Aziz to pass in. She failed to locate him. It was the doubt that had often visited her, but solid and attractive, like the hills, “I’m not—“ Speech was more difficult than vision. “I am not quite sure.”

“I beg your pardon?” said the Superintendent of Police.

“I cannot be sure...”

“I didn’t catch that answer.” He looked scared, his mouth shut with a snap. “You are on that landing, or whatever we term it, and you have entered a cave. I suggest to you that the prisoner followed you.”

She shook her head.

“What do you mean, please?”

“No,” she said in a flat unattractive voice.

XXVIII

And it is because closures are possible that further openings up are possible.

Let me offer a penultimate paradigm, in the spirit of Forster’s distinction between mysteries and muddles.

One can feel bewilderment, anxiety, terror almost, when confronting one’s first VCR so that it will record a programme later in the day.

The control panel is an undifferentiated blur. So is the instruction manual. Which page, which *heading* deals with this matter?

One is afraid of making errors that will disrupt everything—losing channels, blurring reception, etc.

Slowly one identifies the buttons, in a back-and-forthing between coloured three-dimensional protuberances and skeletal black-and-white illustrations, with the aid of explanatory red lines and print.

And one presses buttons in sequence, and sets off mysterious clicks, whirrings, red lights, lit-up numbers.

But it doesn’t *work*. The persons on the screen, so solidly and talkatively *there*, vanish and are replaced by entirely different ones—or by blankness.

And one feels a growing bafflement and despair when each time one follows the sequence (as one thinks) correctly, and each time the desired image does not appear when one presses the “Play” button.

Is one misremembering the instructions? Are the instructions wrong? Is the set defective? Is one *fated* to have a defective set?

One fights against the clock—1.25 pm, 1.38 pm, etc., with 2.30 pm drawing inexorably closer. It seems possible that one will simply *lose* part of the future—that the programme will *not* be there to look at later (gone *irrevocably*, given the badness of one's memory).

One feels anguish, because this is the last programme in a series that may never be repeated. And a sense of guilt. One was given this magical power, and one's blown it.

XXIX

These anxieties, these problems with respect to signs, perception, interpretation, memory, etc., are not groundless.

The robot has its own inflexible laws. There are no short cuts.

But closure is in fact possible (a friend identifies over the phone the single "small" error that one has been making), and finally the programme is there, miraculously, on the tape.

One now knows something about how to use a VCR—not everything, but something.

And in consequence there are new possibilities and futures there with respect to what programmes to record, what tapes to preserve, and so forth.

Reality—one's relationship to past and future—has significantly altered: altered via language and the referentiality of language.

Wittgenstein's "Now I know how to go on" does not mean that everything's now clear and one keeps doing the same thing. It means that one sees how to go on with respect to *that* difficulty and task, and that as a result one can do further things.

XXX

We do indeed hunger for instantaneous understanding and perfect knowledge; it would have been nice to be able to work the new VCR *immediately*.

In his story “The Aleph,” Borges unforgettably embodies the idea of perfect unmediated knowing.

In the dark cellar of a fellow writer’s house, Borges-the-narrator is permitted to see the Aleph,

the only place on earth where all places are—seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending. . . . —the microcosm of the alchemists and Kabbalists, our true proverbial friend, the *multum in parvo*.²⁵

But the experience is both unendurable and incommunicable, and Borges-the-narrator recoils back into the complexities, ironies, and lacunae of the “ordinary” world.

Likewise in *Heart of Darkness*, for all the talk about mysteries and incommunicability, we in fact see Marlow knowing something very well, namely how to navigate a steamboat up a treacherous river with the kind of skill encapsulated in *Towson’s Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship*.

He does not know the Congo to anything like the extent to which Mark Twain’s riverboat pilots knew the Mississippi. But the difference is only one of degree.

There is nothing mystifying about the extraordinary, the really marvellous skills described in *Life on the Mississippi*. And when Mr. Bixbee instructs his cub pilot, the young Sam Clemens, we know that he is successfully communicating his own knowledge and understanding of the immense river.

XXXI

By the time Alice has made her way through her two dream kingdoms, she has acquired a considerable education in what to do when confronted with language puzzles—with non-sequiturs, faulty syllogisms, figurative statements taken literally, false etymologies, reversed homonyms, and so forth.

But the world of those kingdoms is not *merely* verbal. To be wrong in her dealings with language there can mean having her chin jammed

permanently against her feet or her body grotesquely elongated, and being shut out for ever from the longed-for garden; just as reading a river wrongly can mean, for a navigator, bringing disaster upon his ship and those aboard it.

In the world of changing configurations and relationships through which we ourselves have to make our way, the ways in which language enables us to advance with a reasonable degree of confidence are a good deal more remarkable than those in which it fails us.

1989

Notes

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...I do not think there can be much doubt how we have arrived at the idea of an absolutely flat surface where nothing flat exists. Whenever we make something 'flat' and find that it is not flat enough, we always find that by taking more trouble we can make it still flatter: or we have always been able to do so hitherto: and so we find it easy to imagine we are approximating to a perfect flatness where it is beyond our powers or patience to reach.

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Communication, Communion, Communality (1988?)

[T]he central moment of *Ulysses*, the carefully prepared encounter between Bloom and Stephen Dedalus..., indicates, surely, the total impossibility of any contact, of any human communication, even in the most disinterested love.

Paul de Man ¹

I

When Stephen Dedalus is walking along the shore in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a classmate calls out to him, “Stephanos Dedalos! Bous Stephanoumenos! Bous Stephaneforos!”

[A]t the name of the fabulous artificer, he seemed to hear the noise of dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air. What did it mean? Was it a quaint device opening a page of some medieval book of prophecies and symbols, a hawk-like man flying sunward above the sea, a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve and had been following through the mists of childhood and boyhood...?

I am curious as to what we have here.

II

Or what we have when we read at the start of Lawrence’s *The Rainbow* of the desire of the Brangwyn women that their children may “learn the entry into the finer, more vivid circle of life.”

Or when Eugen Herrigel, in *Zen in the Art of Archery*, speaks of “that vital loosening and equability of all [the archer’s] powers, that collectedness and presence of mind, without which no right work can be done.”²

When we listen to Wilhelm Kempf playing Beethoven’s *Hammerklavier* Sonata, or watch the figure skating of Torvil and Dean, or engage in some doing of our own in which we feel ourselves momentarily at the full stretch of our being, do we come back always

to what Nietzsche calls “the derivation of all affects from the one will to power: the same essence”?³

III

I would prefer to speak, rather, of the will to plenitude.

And in these pages I shall be concerned with the communal aspect of plenitude—with what Heidegger calls “the capacity to extend beyond oneself, as a relation to beings in which beings themselves are experiences as being more fully in being, richer, more perspicuous, more essential.”⁴

IV

We hunger for communion. We live by and through it. As Hegel says, “it is the nature of humanity to press onward to agreement with others; human nature only really exists in an achieved community of minds.”⁵ And again: “self-consciousness is real only in so far as it recognizes its echo (and its reflection) in another.”⁶

Which is why in *Nostramo* Conrad’s boulevardier-ironist Decoud is destroyed by his ten days of voiceless isolation on the Great Isabel islet. And why one of the cruellest of punishments, as the nineteenth century discovered, is unrelieved solitary confinement.

The need for a sustaining communality is one of the great modernist themes—of Yeats, and Conrad, and Lawrence; of F.R. Leavis. Even T. S. Eliot, for all his vivid insistencies on our solitariness—

... I have heard the key
Turn in the lock and turn once only
We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison—

craved to be part of communities of discourse, whether theatrical or religious, in which there were predetermined patterns of response and a sharing of perceptions, enjoyments, puzzlements—a working and *being* together.

V

But if one is to reach forward toward community and communality, one has to believe that there is something there that can be attained; something in which one can simultaneously be fully oneself and interact with others who are likewise striving for fullness. It is difficult to commit oneself to something—to reach forward into a future—unless one has a sense of a shape there (a publishable poem or article, a motion passed at a meeting) that one has some chance of realizing.

One needs to feel that there are responders ahead; that what one says with full commitment will be understood and appropriated by others.

One needs the glimpsed, forward-drawing possibility of fulfillment, the possibility of bringing something to a successful conclusion—ordering, articulating, making sense to oneself.

One needs to believe that one can transcend the turmoil of one's conflicting desires and doubts, including doubts as to whether there *is* a self there, a *Gestalt*, not a mere disparate bundle of oddments, a mental attic full of other people's junk.

And in the absence of a forward-reaching and hope-governed momentum, as Lawrence shows us during Siegmund's wretched homecoming in *The Trespasser*, the performance of even the simplest daily tasks may become too painful to face.

VI

It is that kind of momentum, with its existential commitment, that nihilist irony seeks to block and break when it intimates that all journeys are essentially the same, that all paths lead to the same goal, and that that goal, what Yeats calls in "Meru" "the desolation of reality," is already known; that we are all Gatsbys aspiring and striving in the mental service of Daisies about whom we are inevitably going to learn the disillusioning truth.

As Heidegger puts it, "The devaluation of values, hence nihilism, ... consists in the fact that 'an aim' is lacking."⁷

And we know by now a good deal about lost, or blocked, or mistaken aims. Like Hardy, that laureate of thwarted yearnings, we know from Schopenhauer how

All *willing* springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering. Fulfilment brings this to an end; yet for one wish that is fulfilled there remain at least ten that are denied.... No attained object of willing can give a satisfaction that lasts and no longer declines; but it is always like the alms thrown to a beggar, which reprieves him today so that his misery may be prolonged till tomorrow.⁸

We know Gatsby's grotesque over-idealizing of Daisy, and Jean-Louis Barrault's hopeless fixation on Arletty in that classic of desire *Les Enfants du Paradis*.

In *À Rebours*, after browsing in the English bookstore on the Rue de Rivoli and gorging himself on Englishness in a couple of Paris taverns, Huysmans' Des Esseintes breaks off his projected trip to England because there is nothing left for him now to find there, and returns to the environment of fictions that he has constructed for himself in his country house at Frontenay.

VII

Moreover, there have been a plethora of challengings and underminings with respect to the "thereness" of the world that we think we inhabit.

As Michael Novak puts it in his book on nihilism, "even the most solid and powerful social institutions, though they may imprison us, impoverish us, or kill us, are fundamentally mythical structures designed to hold chaos and formlessness at bay; they are more like dreams than like reality."⁹

When Celia Coplestone in Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* tells psychiatrist Reilly how people

... make noises, and think they are talking to each other; They make faces, and think they understand each other, And I'm sure that they don't,

she is not simply confessing to a private breakdown in which “I have no delusions—/Except that the world I live in seems all a delusion!”

As we learn in the Penguin volume *Modernism*, for a number of writers

That which links thought with language, language with the external world, and man with man has disappeared. Like the mock tennis game at the end of Antonioni’s *Blow-up*, all language games are felt to have become absurd because the ball, that which guarantees communication between subject and object, is lost.¹⁰

In such a world, as Gerald Graff points out, “thought is an arbitrary exercise, judgment is beset by a hopeless relativism, and intellectual discussion and debate are little more than pointless shadowboxing.”¹¹

VIII

And the kinds of shakings and underminings that I am talking about are dynamic ones.

When Nick Carraway tells us how Gatsby, with Daisy lost to him,

must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves.... A new world, material without being real....,

we know that nothing very dramatic would have happened had he lived. He would have kept going, though without the momentum of conviction; would have started drinking, put on weight, probably died early of high blood pressure.

But there are perils in the idea of the innate fictiveness and falsity of public roles and performances.

IX

In the characteristic modern dichotomy that contrasts the “real” and voiceless intimacy of bringing someone to orgasm with the empty masks and theatre of public-role performances, both sides of the coin

are doomed to be disappointing—the former an endless never-to-be-satisfied desiring; the latter permeated by a consciousness of falsity.

And as Kafka knew all too well, selves that are conscious of their falsity are liable to implosion and collapse.

To be—or believe oneself to be—inauthentic is to be open always to accusation, and to the sense that all accusations will be essentially true since one's motives are always ignoble.

One moves toward a paranoid clatter of voices in one's head, such as Beckett presents in *Play*, in which nothing ever comes to the point where response and refutation are possible:

w1: When I was satisfied it was all over I went to have a gloat. Just a common tart. What he could have found in her when he had me—

w2: When he came again we had it out, I felt like death. He went on about why he had to tell her. Too risky and so on. That meant he had gone back to her. Back to that!

w1: Pudding face, puffy, spots, blubber mouth, jowls, no neck, dugs you could—

w2: He went on and on. ¹²

One becomes trapped in the kind of process in which, when writing an article, one starts anticipating questionings of it and seeing points that could or should be followed up, and rewrites it only to see further objections, and finally junks it because what one is trying to say appears so simple-minded as to be not worth saying; all this without having entered into the real circle of dialogue at all.

X

Ultimately, as R.D. Laing puts it in his classic study of schizophrenia *The Divided Self*, “The self ... feels crushed and mangled even at the exchanges in an ordinary conversation.” ¹³

And one becomes simply an object for dissection by others; a “case”.

In this regard, one of the most significant text-clusters in modern criticism is the no-ghost impugnings of the governess in James's *The Turn of the Screw*, in which we are taken further and further away from the particularity, the *individuality*, of the governess's own discourse, and are presented with the possibility that someone may be totally wrong about themselves and totally incapable of reading their own situation, despite all the sophistication of their discourse and their own most strenuous concern to arrive at the truth of the matter.

XI

Furthermore, discourse can dwindle to empty power relationships in ways that answer to the crude construing of the Nietzschean will to power—that is, as the will to dominance.

Iris Murdoch suggests that for Sartre “the simple virtues of human intercourse become forms of insincerity. Only reflection and freedom are desired as ends and yet these turn out to be without content.”¹⁴

And another commentator remarks that “Sartre finds it impossible to think of any system or order in which one is ‘enclosed’ with others except as a power that destroys existence and against which one must defend oneself.”¹⁵

In such terms, one inhabits an intellectual world of Napoleonic ambitions, a battle-ground of claims to possessing the one right mode of discourse that destabilizes, undercuts, and overrides all others.

We get a foretaste of that world in *Paradise Lost*, with its thin repertoire of enjoyments and gratifications, its dwindling of types of being and doing to an innocent ignorance on the one hand and authoritarian power-holding and rebellious power-seeking on the other, and its reduction of discourse to the rhetoric of argument and manipulation.

XII

The operations of power-seeking scepticism in the Napoleonic world are nicely described by a commentator on Hegel:

Among the things that come and go, the sceptical consciousness retains its undeviating posture. In the universal flux, it feels its own stability. The restlessness or uncertainty everywhere present reflects the disintegrative might of consciousness. Scepticism, in short, succeeds in dissolving everything but itself. . . , the sceptic thus resuming the place of master who, by his annihilative intellect, can subjugate everything to his imperious will to disbelieve. ¹⁶

What is sought is not the assent of grateful recognition (“Yes, of course, I simply hadn’t noticed the importance of that line”) but a reluctant acknowledgment of a point scored that negates a whole position.

XIII

And in the absence of a *happy* reality, a fructifying communal reality, the seamy side becomes the “real” side, in keeping with the Naturalist feeling that telling the truth about something means pointing to something *nasty*.

A dialogue of mutual exploration and discovery between face-to-face individuals becomes impossible.

Argument becomes an affair of allegorical decodings, an engagement not with what someone has said but with what he or she *hasn’t* said.

So that his or her discourse ceases to be the discourse of an individual to whom attention must be paid, and becomes merely representative and symptomatic.

XIV

Down the road, too, lie more literal annihilations.

In *If this is a Man*, Primo Levi recalls how during the reception process at Auschwitz,

Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed

to us; we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us any more; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand.¹⁷

Behind Nietzsche, as Nietzsche himself obviously knew, looms the challenge of Sade's view of power relationships, with its foregrounding of the problem of why the powerful should not, in terms of their own pleasure and plenitude, do as they please with regard to the powerless.

XV

Which brings me back to the question of reaching forward to something—to plenitude, to “fullness.”

Living forward—“Le vent se lève! ... Il faut tenter de vivre!” as Valéry says in the penultimate stanza of “Le Cimetière Marin”—entails sensing stretches and forkings ahead, with their various patterns of challenge and satisfaction.

One needs the glimpsed shapes of rewarding sequences of discourse—debate, conversation, monologue, etc. One needs the promise of family conversations that don't invariably end in bitter quarrels, and discussions at work in which one isn't always beaten down. One needs the possibility of satisfying roles.

And these things are indeed possible; are “real.”

XVI

It is a curious assumption that someone is being less him- or herself (or not being his real self at all) when engaged in a professional performance—the professor conducting a seminar, the bullfighter working a bull, the concert violinist playing Bach.

If doing badly in a role in which one wants to do well can be painful, doing well can be deeply fulfilling.

And to want to do something well—teach, write, bring up children, lead people in battle—is in part to want to be a certain kind of person: to approximate oneself to specific figures whom one has known, or seen, or heard about.

To want to be a philosopher is to want to be like Wittgenstein, or Nietzsche, or Heidegger, or Socrates, or some other hero. Which is to say, in part, to *discourse* like them, to display certain kinds of aplomb or daring in the handling of problems and opponents.

Just as to be in love is to be in discourse situations with someone else that go along like the dialogues between Birkin and Ursula in Lawrence's *Women in Love*, or Bogart and Bergman in *Casablanca*, or whatever one's favourite paradigms are.

XVII

Nor do structured relationships have to be master/slave ones.

Dancing, singing, playing musical instruments together are not master/slave activities. Nor are good convivial occasions, such as the Ramsays' party in *To the Lighthouse* or the comfortable good talk among friends described in poems by J.V. Cunningham and Yvor Winters.

Such occasions are permeated by *non*-dominative affect—the giving of pleasure to others. As a critic nicely puts it of meals in children's books, "Food may be, in fact, the sex of children's literature."¹⁸

Nor are recreational games master/slave affairs.

A *coerced* games-playing (as in the gladiatorial exhibitions of the Roman arena or the parentally dominated sports of children) can indeed be zero-sum. But in principle games are things that people enter into freely, and in which everyone has a chance of winning sometimes.

Implicit in the idea of handicapping, as in golf and horse-racing, is the bringing of all the competitors to as near an equality as possible, so that the outcome will never be a foregone conclusion.

As Dick Francis points out in one of his thrillers, the perfect handicapping of a race (loading the saddles with weights in keeping

with past performances) would be one in which all the horses crossed the finishing line at almost the same moment.

Nor are great or good public occasions in the arts ones in which the performers *dominate* the spectators.

In that marvellous record *The Last Night at the Proms*, with its good-humoured interplay between conductor and audience and the full-throated collective singing of “Land of Hope and Glory” and “Jerusalem,” everyone is obviously enjoying a fullness of being that could come in no other way.

XVIII

And communication goes on.

Just as the experience of an absence grows out of and depends on the experience of a presence—whether for the child abruptly deprived by death of Grandma (“But where *is* she?”) or the marooned Decoud stripped of all his customary activities and relationships—so we speak of non-communication because we know what communication feels like.

When we say perplexedly or angrily in the course of a discussion, “I’m afraid we don’t seem to be communicating,” we are implying that we *could* be communicating. And when we refer in a common-sense and common-experience way to communication and non-communication, we are not doing so in zero-sum terms.

We are not speaking as if the only meaningful advance in a football game is a touchdown, so that all other advances are meaningless.

We are not postulating as communication the kind of Rousseauistic total identity of being wherein another virtually *is* oneself—feels instantaneously, and without the need for voicing, all that one is feeling and thinking.

When a couple of friends are talking about where to go for dinner, and we tell them we recently had a good meal at a new Italian restaurant, we don’t find ourselves reaching a point where we say desperately, “But I’m still not really conveying to you what the meal was *like*.”

And if next day they report that they went there and liked it, we're all satisfied with the transaction.

XIX

Non-communication, or insufficient communication, occurs, of course.

In his "Memories of Wittgenstein," Leavis recalls how on one occasion Wittgenstein asked him who William Empson (then an undergraduate) was and he replied that he had recently read six poems by him and that they were all good.

"What are they like?" asked Wittgenstein. I replied that there was little point in my describing them, since he didn't know enough about English poetry. "If you like them," he said, "you can describe them." So I started: "You know Donne?" No, he didn't know Donne.... Baulked, I made a few lame observations about the nature of the conceit, and gave up.¹⁹

If it is frustrating trying to convey to someone who isn't a movie fan what a movie that one's excited about was like, describing to one's satisfaction a vivid dream can be downright impossible.

And for much the same reasons. One is trying to convey not only a sequence of highly individuated images and events but the nature of one's experiencing of them. One is trying to be Alice narrating her own adventures.

At times, too, one can yearn to be able to bring one's darkest doings and imaginings into words without appalling one's interlocutor; or hunger for the kind of dialogue in which one doesn't simply "communicate" things that one knows already, but says and discovers fresh things as one goes along.

XX

Literature has given us memorable examples of mutual isolation, too.

When Stephen Dedalus is visiting Cork with his robustly nostalgic father—"When you kick out for yourself, Stephen—as I daresay you

will one of these days—remember, whatever you do, to mix with gentlemen”—Stephen’s

very brain was sick and powerless. He could scarcely interpret the letters of the signboards of the shops. By his monstrous way of life he seemed to have put himself beyond the limits of reality. Nothing moved him or spoke to him from the real world unless he heard in it an echo of the infuriated cries within him.

The angers and anguishes of the heroines of Jean Rhys’s *Good Morning, Midnight* and *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* are simply not *there* for almost anyone with whom they have dealings.

Verloc and Winnie Verloc lead separate lives with respect to what concerns them most.

And at one point in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow famously breaks out with,

“He was just a word for me. I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams....”

He was silent for a while.

“... No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one’s existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone....”

XXI

But just as an academic who discourses jauntily about the absurdity of language and the arbitrariness of all codes is unlikely to look philosophically on a misplaced decimal point that deflates his pay-

cheque, so all of us are only too aware at times of the reality of communication.

When someone is snotty to us at a party or face-to-face furious about the garden depredations of our cat, he or she is communicating and we wish they weren't.

At times, too, like the accused in the witness-box, people work hard at *avoiding* communicating what they think and feel and know. If the lady of Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady" hungers for communion—

"I am always sure that you understand
My feelings, always sure that you feel,
Sure that across the gulf you reach your hand"—

the narrator is anxious to conceal how unsympathetically he in fact feels toward her.

And when in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* the Assistant Commissioner catches sight of Chief Inspector Heat's contemptuous expression, he reads it correctly and proceeds, to Heat's chagrin, to "turn him inside out like an old glove."

XXII

And communion occurs; experiencings *can* be shared.

When two people watch some sporting event on TV together that they both enjoy—the figure skating of Torvil and Dean, say—and comment about it to each other, they are communing.

The two young sea-captains in Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" form, effectively, a community of two, by virtue of their shared experiences.

And when we read the lovely account of the party in the penultimate chapter of *Persuasion*, we are unlikely to be put in mind of Arnold's "To Marguerite" and of how—amid the "unplumbed, salt, estranging sea"—"we mortal millions live *alone*."

The evening came, the drawing-rooms were lighted up, the company assembled. It was but a card-party, it was but a mixture of those who had never met before, and those who met too often—

a commonplace business, too numerous for intimacy, too small for variety; but Anne had never found an evening shorter.... With the Musgroves, there was the happy chat of perfect ease; with Captain Harville, the kind-hearted intercourse of brother and sister; with Lady Russell, attempts at conversation, which a delicious consciousness cut short; with Admiral and Mrs. Croft, everything of peculiar cordiality and fervent interest which the same consciousness sought to conceal;—and with Captain Wentworth, some moments of communication continually occurring, and always the hope of more, and always the knowledge of his being there!

In the beautiful stretch of dialogue immediately after this, in which the two lovers think their way (each with trust in the other) through the earlier attitudes on their part that had delayed their coming together, it is clear why Anne would indeed look forward to “more.”

XXIII

As *Heart of Darkness* demonstrates, even intensely individual experiencings can, up to a point, be communicated.

Marlowe may grumble about the impossibility of conveying to his hearers on the *Nellie* what things were really like for him in the Congo, and the silence after he finishes his narrative may seem to reinforce that judgment.

But in fact he has described his experiences in great detail, so that we feel along with him in the act of recollecting.

And if we aren't told what has been going on in the minds of his hearers, that doesn't necessarily mean that all of them have simply reduced his narrative to a sailor's yarn. Certainly the framing narrator of the novel hasn't.

The novel stands, moreover, with a lot of others whose popularity testifies to the instinctive belief in the possibility of more or less reliable recall: *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *Death on the Installment Plan*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Good Morning*, *Midnight*, *Remembrance of Things Past*, and so on; and a host of good thrillers.

XXIV

Nor is it only fictional characters like Marlow, or Stephen Dedalus, or Lawrence's Birkin, or a number of Henry James's protagonists, who work at trying to get across to others what they see, feel, think.

The struggle to render things precisely is part of what made their creators heroic, as it did the Hardy who, in the poems of 1912-13, tried to re-enter and re-speak his relationship with his dead wife.

And central to modern literature is a prodigious expansion of means for conveying how minds in fact work (including the rendering of dream-like experiences).

So is the concern—and not only in the drama of Ibsen, Beckett, and so on—with the act of discoursing.

Hardy's great love poems are distinguished from Renaissance love poems by the constant sense in them of the presence of the person addressed ("I see what you are doing: you are leading me on...", "Why do you make me leave the house...?").

Eliot's poetry is full of people saying things and being disquietingly present to one another.

And when in "Meditations in Time of Civil War" Yeats speaks of how "We are closed in, and the key is turned / On our uncertainty...", it is a temporary state that he is describing, not *la condition humaine*.

Yeats is *the* modern poet who talks about people talking with each other: "One that is ever kind said yesterday...", "O but we talked at large before / The sixteen men were shot," "I walk through the long schoolroom questioning..." etc.

XXV

Moreover, communality does not depend on people "liking" one another.

If we value theatre as we do, it is partly because good theatre, like good tennis and great trials, is a paradigm of the agonistic. Competing individualities thrust against each other, aims and attitudes can be

totally irreconcilable, and words have consequences, sometimes tragic or horrible ones.

“Lawsuits,” a professor of law observes, “are frightening: they can be lost even with a sound case, and they are, in folklore and in fact, dangerous places where one incautious word or ventured fact will be seized upon by relentless lawyers on the other side....”²⁰

Much the same can be said of what goes on in a good many plays, and in other arenas. Protagoras, Gorgias, and the rest are unpersuaded by Socrates’ arguments, and eventually Socrates dies because of what he has said. Koestler’s Rubashov in *Darkness at Noon*, having been annihilated intellectually and morally so far as the public world is concerned, is shot through the back of the neck in the prison cellar.

XXVI

But as theatre also demonstrates, it can be possible to live with these facts without everything blowing apart.

When Prospero abandons the purity of his island and its opportunities for the free creation of fictions, and opts instead for the much more complex interminglings of fictions and physical realities in Milan—the given as well as the made—, he accepts the ongoing-co-existence of very different kinds of persons, some of them dangerous to others and absolutely closed to moral suasion.

But it is not a passive, a merely resigned, acceptance. He recognizes, as does the play as a whole, that power can be contained by power, and that intelligence must always concern itself with the channeling and humanizing of power.

XXVII

One of the major twentieth-century cultural advances has been the increase in sociological understanding whereby one passes beyond Marlowe’s—and Conrad’s—rather Hollywoodian sense of inexplicable mysteries with respect to “primitive” peoples.

And in the complex and nurturing structures of hunting-gathering communities, one sees patterns of interaction, and of the distribution of

power, that help one to get beyond Nietzsche's reiterations with respect to master and slave mentalities, and his fixation on Imperial Rome as the paradigm of political power.

So do the unworldly social relationships of wolves as described by ethologists, and the structures of primate communities. As a columnist puts it,

Baboon life ... is an endless series of negotiations. The drama of their lives revolves not around sex or male intimidation but around alliances, around friendships. Baboons have a Japanese complexity of deferences and dominances. They live, it seems to a newcomer, in a constant state of distraction and tension, as if caught in an elastic web of attractions and repulsions, a web constantly in motion, in adjustment of distances.²¹

And the agonistic nature of the great Socratic dialogues has something to say to us about the life of the mind.

XXVIII

It is common these days, when critics want to praise one another and have reservations about being thought mere games-players, to speak of their *rigour*—the rigour of heroic mountaineers up among the cold white peaks of undeluded intellectuality.

Well, rigour can indeed be desirable.

Ideas have consequences, language, especially figurative language, can blur an understanding of relationships, and in an age of over-abundant information it is easy to read with slackened attention.

As Hans-Georg Gadamer observes, "Among the greatest insights given us by Plato's account of Socrates is that, contrary to the general opinion, it is more difficult to ask questions than to answer them."²²

And a good many of us learned from critics like Leavis and Winters the need to look sceptically on the kind of bland, pseudo-objective account of a work that offers itself as simply The Truth about that work, and the importance of bearing down on individual poems and passages.

Given the approximateness of received opinion, the crudeness of most terminology, and the aplomb with which critics can say things about a work that are just dead wrong, there is obviously no substitute for reading a work oneself—reading it, where necessary, rigorously.

XXIX

But normally we do not read thrillers rigorously, or listen to Billie Holiday or the great aria of lament from Gluck's *Orfeo* rigorously, or look at Rembrandt's *The Jewish Bride* rigorously.

We read or look or listen *attentively*; we *concentrate* on the works; we seek to allow them into their fullest being, down to the smallest nuances or brush-strokes or phrasing.

And the right kind of rigorousness is likewise a bringing into being.

XXX

It begins, in a sense, with oneself.

With Socrates one asks, "Do I understand that assertion? Let me think of an example. Are there any obvious exceptions to it? Is it *true*? If it *were* true, would it mean that such-and-such would also be true?"

But the process is also communal, both in the sense that one is mentally asking such questions of the author, and in the sense that one turns to others for corroboration or correction ("Aren't you puzzled by this? Am I overlooking something?").

And it is not simply disintegrative, any more than Wittgenstein took language apart like a watch and then walked away and left it.

If one is exasperated by how some kinds of argumentation collapse when one presses on them, it is because others *don't*.

And one is always implicitly striving, like Socrates, towards a maximum accommodation of phenomena, of things that are indeed "there" for one.

XXXI

Implicit in all this, too, is the principle of clarity and clarification. If the great philosophers are difficult, it is not because their language is arcane but because what they say is problematic.

To read philosophers like Plato, or Berkeley, or Wittgenstein, or Nietzsche *in extenso* is not an anxiety-making experience, or a disintegrative one. The works are communal in a straightforward way: the arguments and counter-arguments, the sense of the possible reactions, the puzzlements and objections, of readers are there in the works.

And there is a good deal to be said for the Chestertonian principle that it should be possible to keep rephrasing and expanding an argument until an intelligent non-specialist is able to understand what is being said.

For it is here that one reaches back out into, and becomes fully a part of, a communal world in which functional, limited closures are possible.

XXXII

Trials by jury are like that.

There can be no mystifications, no self-privilegings with respect to one's mode of discourse.

The "expert" witness—as led forward by the defending or prosecuting lawyer—has got to be able to make him- or herself clear to the car salesman and bank-teller in the jury box.

And if the last hundred years has been a century of emblematic trials or quasi-trials—the Wilde trials, the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, the Moscow trials, the Hiss trial, the Watergate hearings, and so forth—and if the dominant figure of popular fiction has been the detective, this testifies to a significant perception with respect to truth.

Whereas the doings of the scientist in popular fiction are generally harmful, those of the detective are almost invariably benign.

And they testify to the conviction that at times it can indeed be possible not only to demolish a seemingly cast-iron version of “the facts”—the simple and obvious version of who shot the millionaire in his library—but to arrive at a true one.

XXXIII

Real life is less tidy, of course.

As we all know by now, the purpose of a trial is not to reveal *the* truth, but only to determine limited truths in relation to specific accusations or claims. One is not trying to determine who shot the newspaper tycoon, merely whether his partner—sitting there in the dock—did so.

But the properly conducted trial or quasi-judicial investigative hearing is still one of our major paradigms for the agonistic determination of what happened on this or that occasion.

In it we are engaged, as in other matters, in translating “texts” (“When I looked into the library at 5.30 p.m, the room was empty”) back into terms of a consistent physical reality.

And one works all the time (for there is nothing else one *can* do) towards the closure of commitment.

One says, finally: “Having considered all the evidence and arguments, I can only say that I am convinced that the partner did *not* do it. I am *certain* of that, given the paranoid reconstruction of the world that would be necessary in order to have all those persons at the party mistaken (or lying) about his being there; and virtually certain that it was the secretary who did it.”

Just as one says, in an academic context: “I am now convinced, having considered all the available evidence and arguments, that the poem was written in 1603, not 1600—and that it is not by Shakespeare.”

XXXIV

Language works, the ball is there, games are not absurd—and they can be won.

After reading Chief Inspector Heat's expression correctly and turning him inside out, the Assistant Commissioner goes on to ascertain who was in fact blown to pieces in Greenwich Park and who was ultimately responsible for it, and obliquely and economically conveys his knowledge to Mr. Vladimir, who reads his message correctly and drives grimly away without a word.

"The Assistant Commissioner himself did not turn into the noble building. It was the Explorers' Club. The thought passed through his mind that Mr. Vladimir, honorary member, would not be seen very often there in the future."

If we recoil from flesh-creeping pronouncements about the impossibility of communication, it is not because we are afraid to face how things really are in our human world, it is because, when we aren't generating postmodernist discourse, we *know* how they are.

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4. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche; Vol. 1: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 100.
5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, fore. J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), p. 43.
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8. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (N.Y.: Dover, 1969), vol. I, p. 196.
9. Michael Novak, *The Experience of Nothingness* (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 1.
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15. Helmut Thielicke, *Nihilism; Its Origin and Nature—with a Christian Answer*, trans. John W. Doberstein, introd. Michael Novak (N.Y.: Schocken, 1969), p. 172.
16. J. Loewenberg, *Hegel's 'Phenomenology': Dialogues on The Life of Mind* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1965), pp. 94–5.
17. Primo Levi, *If this is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: New English Library, 1969), p. 17.
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20. Ronald Dworkin, "The Press on Trial," *New York Review of Books*, Feb. 26, 1977, p. 28.
21. Lance Morrow summarizing anthropologist Shirley Strum, "Africa," *Time*, Feb. 23, 1987, p. 46.
22. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translation ed. by Garrett Barden and John Cummings (N.Y.: Seabury, 1975), p. 326.

Mind-Forged Manacles

(1990)

In 1989 the editors of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* sent out a questionnaire, the key passages of which seemed to me the following:

Is there a gulf between the educated, non-academic public and the university intellectuals, a gulf that is new (or widening) and that is both the cause of a decline in public culture and the consequence of the intellectuals' commitment to their university professions?...

Is there a nostalgia for public intellectuals that were it satisfied would issue in ideas as quaintly anachronistic as 'public forms of fiction' unmarked by modernist or post-modernist reflexiveness and difficulty?

My own reply follows.

I

I've read and reread your letter and questions but remain puzzled. Symposiums of this sort are normally geared to possible action—"Is too much money being spent on high-tech medicine and not enough on preventive medicine?", "Should the *UTQ* devote more of its space to politics?", and so forth. Here I can't see what is being aimed at, not explicitly anyway, and facing your plethora of questions I feel as if I were trapped amid the labyrinthine options and permutations of a diet sheet.

Moreover, when I read or dip into journals like the *New York Review of Books*, *Commentary*, and *Scientific American*, I see no lack of intelligent academics writing clearly for intelligent non-specialist readers without talking down to them and without losing sight of the fellow specialists waiting to pounce on them in the correspondence columns. Nor is the prose in high-tech journals like *Critical Inquiry* always hopelessly coruscated.

II

However, reading between the lines, I can sense a pattern of sorts.

Would it be a good thing if Canada had non-specialist journals of the caliber of the *NYRB*, *Commentary*, the *New Criterion*, the *Village Voice*? Obviously yes. They are not simply places in which ideas are mediated. They are forums in which no-holds-barred arguing about important public issues goes on, and on the face of things there is no reason why there couldn't be Canadian journals as lively and invigorating.

But, some things can't simply be ordered from the Sears catalogue, and there's a chill-factor to be considered here.

III

Writers like George Orwell, and Dwight Macdonald, and Mary McCarthy were intellectual free-lances, unafraid to challenge what Orwell called "all those smelly little orthodoxies which are... contending for our souls." As are writers like Nat Hentoff and Joseph Epstein, and as were the contributors to *Scrutiny* in the 1930s, for me still *the* model of what a high-intensity professional journal in the humanities should be like.

In Canadian universities, if I can judge from my own, orthodoxies are becoming increasingly entrenched. Latin America, South Africa, pornography, nuclear disarmament, affirmative action, and so on—by now, for a lot of people, there is obviously only one intellectually respectable position with regard to a number of issues.

And to suggest that things may be more complicated than they seem—that if liberals, for example, want to preserve their own freedom to read and look they must be prepared, along with Alan Borovoy and the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, to put up legally with the existence of hate literature—is to risk immediately having a whole nexus of unsavoury attitudes ascribed to one.

So that if a younger faculty member were to venture significantly beyond the pale in these days of peer evaluation, grant-giving, and other control systems, it could have significant consequences for his or her career. An experienced and highly professional child psychologist of my acquaintance spoke to me recently of having been severely reprimanded by colleagues when she referred to a little girl as behaving "seductively."

I don't doubt, either, that one reason why that admirable *Scrutiny*-like journal *Compass* (1977-80) failed to obtain the modest funding that would have enabled it to carry on was that it didn't subscribe to a gung-ho literary Canadianism.

IV

A great deal of momentum is required if one is going to go seriously into a subject without safe preconceptions as to what one will find there. And the life of the mind—our collective thinking and arguing, with an eye, ultimately, to social action—becomes blurred and blunted when there can't be a free passage back and forth between theories and practices, a testing-out of each in the light of the other, and a refusal to ignore particulars when they fail to fit with what some theory tells one *ought* to be the case.

Which is why I myself go on being grateful for journalists like June Callwood and Barbara Amiel (“Barbara Amiel? Did he say Barbara Amiel?”), and for the free, sophisticated, and multi-voiced debates on the Left in the *Village Voice*, and the robustly heterodox feminism of books like *Good Girls/Bad Girls* and *Coming to Power*.

V

Moreover, lurking around, as you remind us, is an attitude that would make broad-spectrum intellectual debate impossible.

For me the central passage in your letter is your allusion to the belief that “serious thinking about art, ideas, politics, and society can no more be carried on today in the prose of an Orwell than serious thinking about nature can be carried on by scientists working in basement and garage laboratories.”

Well, a lot of prose is inadequate to its pretensions, and academics are as capable of superficiality as anyone else, as witness a best-seller like Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* or Russell Jacoby's equally simplistic lament from the Left in *The Last Intellectuals*. But if instead of “the prose of Orwell” your statement were to read, “the prose of Orwell, Rawls, Nietzsche, Arendt, Wittgenstein, Kuhn, Braudel, Clausewitz, Benjamin, Winters, Beauvoir, Freud, Gombrich,

Huizinga, William James,” the absurdity of that belief would be obvious.

For of course it’s not a question of simple, which is to say over-simplifying, prose versus difficult high-tech prose. As Jacques Barzun pointed out years ago in an attack on jargon, a statement like “If there are more trees in the world than there are leaves on any one tree, then there must be at least two trees with the same number of leaves” is difficult on a first reading not because of its language but because of what it says.

VI

Obviously not everything can be conveyed to everyone. “I know not whether the reader will readily apprehend this reasoning,” Hume observes at one point. “I am afraid that, should I multiply words about it, or throw it into a greater variety of lights, it would only become more obscure and intricate.”

And Leavis amusingly recalls how Wittgenstein, dropping in on the Leavises early one afternoon in 1930, stayed and stayed and *stayed*, trying to explain (to bemused ears turned after a while to other guests) a philosophical paradox, and afterwards apologizing for his lateness at a philosophical gathering by saying that he had been “arguing all the afternoon with Dr. Leavis.”

Sometimes too, as Louis Armstrong reportedly said when asked what jazz was, “If you has to ask, you ain’t *never* going to know.”

VII

But one of the glories of scholarship, as in Charles Taylor’s *Hegel* or Gardner Davies’s books on Mallarmé, is the ability to be lucid about difficult matters without over-simplifying them. And in a good-faith encounter between intelligent equals it should in principle be possible to explain what one is up to, or what someone one admires is up to, and move back or down until one can draw on works and experiences with which the other is acquainted.

Wittgenstein was obviously always *trying* to be clear. Another memorialist recalls how “He would talk for long periods without interruption, using similes and allegories, strolling about the room and gesticulating.”

And part of what makes a masterpiece of compact exposition like Kant’s *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* accessible is the disposition revealed in a passage like the following:

What would be said if we were asked to be satisfied with a division of the epochs of the world into the earlier centuries and those following them? Does the fifth, or the tenth century belong to the earlier centuries? it would be asked. In the same way I ask: Does the conception of extension belong to metaphysics? You answer, yes. Well, that of body too? Yes. And that of a fluid body? You stop, you are unprepared to admit this, for if you do, everything will belong to metaphysics.

Or, very beautifully, in this from *Critique of Pure Reason*:

The light dove cleaving in free flight the thin air, whose resistance it feels, might imagine that her movements would be far more free and rapid in airless space. Just in the same way did Plato, abandoning the world of sense because of the narrow limits it sets to the understanding, venture upon the wings of ideas beyond it, into the void of pure intellect.

Even Plotinus, for all his pointings to the ineffable, works constantly at trying to make himself clear to his philosophical readers in normal dialogic terms, alert to objections that might be raised, occasions for misunderstanding and confusion, possible exceptions to his generalizations, and so forth.

VIII

By and large, the best professionals aren’t immured in their professional jargons. Nor do they view the discourse of persons who don’t possess those jargons as having, where challenges to their own authority are concerned, a merely symptomatic value as an index to prejudices, anxieties, hostilities.

In contrast to the dominative kind of psychiatrists or social worker, they are prepared to attend, as one individual to another, to what is said to them, without feeling that they already know what it signifies. And technical terms don't enter their experiencings prematurely and exclude all those features that don't immediately fit the aim of creating professional discourse.

Which is why in principle a professor of English should be able to teach both graduate students and freshmen without baffling or boring them. If one's critical approach is coherent, tested out, and thought through, it should be capable of functioning well at all levels, and if it doesn't allow one to reach back to one's own pre-professional enjoyment of reading—essentially the child's curiosity about what happens next... and next... and next—so much the worse for the approach.

IX

And the pleasure that students take in acquiring new technical terms should involve knowing how to use them in a variety of contexts, seeing what they *don't* apply to as well as what they do, and having an enhanced sense of plenitude and growth. As Rousseau observes,

The mind which derives its ideas from real relations is thorough; the mind which relies on apparent relations is superficial. . . . When the understanding lays hold of things before they are stored in the memory, what is drawn from that store is [our] own; while we are in danger of never finding anything of our own in a memory overburdened with undigested knowledge.

Terms like Wittgenstein's "family likenesses" or the basic terminology of metrics permit of fuller experiencings and more subtle and accurate descriptions of them.

My own strong impression from the reading of theses, grant applications, and the dossiers of job applicants is that the principles of solid, intelligent, and humane academic argumentation remain the same regardless of what position people write from or the technical terms that they employ.

X

Nor is all this a matter of what is sometimes contemptuously referred to as mere talk. The modern non-academic generalists who have mattered—the Arendts, Benjamins, Orwells, Koestlers, Beauvoirs, *et al*—have been political moralists. They have been concerned with action, with power, with interrelationships between theories and practices.

And though Orwell never gave any sign of having read *Scrutiny*, Q.D. Leavis, herself a model of clarity and commitment, was able to say this of him in 1940:

His varied writings bear an unvarying stamp: they are responsible, adult and decent.... Without having scholarship or an academic background he yet gives the impression of knowing a surprising amount about books and authors—because what he knows is live information, not card-index rubbish, his knowledge functions.... [H]is style is refreshing, that of the man whose first aim is to say something which he has quite clear in his head.... He is evidently a live mind working through literature, life and ideas.

Even more to the point, she observes that, though

He is and probably always will be a critic of literature who, while not a Communist, has nevertheless corresponding preoccupations.... the great thing is, he has a special kind of honesty, he corrects any astygmatic tendency in himself because in literature as in politics he has taken up a stand which gives him freedom.... If the revolution here were to happen that he wants and prophesies, the advent of real Socialism, he would be the only man of letters we have whom we can imagine surviving the flood undisturbed.

XI

Obviously by now there is an alternative tradition of intellectual academic prose that goes back to Hegel and numbers Heidegger and Derrida among its luminaries, and one must live with it if one is interested in what's being said, though my own patience ends decidedly this side of Fredric Jameson.

But it seems to me a bad tradition none the less, in that it offers far more opportunities for obscurantism, mystification, and authoritarianism.

Orwell seems to me still essentially right when he says, “If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself.”

If one aspires to heights and depths beyond Orwell’s reach, one would do well to bear in mind that, apart from the fustian *Zarathustra*, it isn’t the prose of Nietzsche that’s become passé.

What *is* passé, almost certainly, is the prose of a lot of those very professional philosophers for whom, in the absence of the proper linguistic signals, Nietzsche was during his lifetime, and for a good while afterwards, merely a basement tinkerer and putterer.

1990

III

Reading Mallarmé (1994)

For a brief account of the contexts of this and the following unrevised pieces, see section XXI in the Introduction. The dual text that we were using was Angel Flores' *An Anthology of French Poetry*.

I

"I put a great deal of effort... into getting that speech... into verse. *He* put a great deal of effort... into turning it back... into prose again." (W.B. Yeats, misquoted from memory, about an actor in one of his plays)

II

For the first go, we'll focus on the following poems by Mallarmé "Les fenêtres" (1863/1866), "Las de l'amer repos..."(1864/1866), "Brise marine,"(1865/1866), "Soupir"(1864/66) "Le Pitre châtié." [1864?/1887] That may not sound like much, but it should keep us occupied. The first of those dates is the reported date of composition, the second of the first publication.

III

I want us (which I don't think is simply a synonym for "you") to bring to our task only our abilities as readers of poems. I do not want us to talk about what Mallarmé "really" meant in/by this or that poem, line, word, as if we already knew how Mallarmé's mind worked. I do not want us to talk about "l'Azur."

As we all know by now, poems are not simply voicings of "ideas" or "beliefs" or "thoughts," or "opinions," which is to say, of coherently articulated structures which can be extracted from a poem as though we were operating with knife and fork on a fish on our dinner plate.

We do not have to choose between celebrating a poet's uttered profundities (as in the bardic view of poets like Milton and Wordsworth), or condemning a poem because we disapprove of what it "says" (as in the critical/romantic dismissal of Pope as not a poet at

all), or, more sophisticatedly, showing how aspects of a poem significantly don't fit with, and may in fact be in conflict with, the statement that the poem is presumed (but by whom?) to be making.

IV

When we say “Mallarmé,” or “Poe,” or “X” (shorthand for “the-author-of-that-poem-about-hash-in-the last-issue-of-*Fathom*”) we are talking all the time about what I have no trouble with describing as a textual construct.

We are talking about what we have pieced together from reading *this* poem and *that* poem and this letter, and those diary entries, and that article, and this person's report of what the writer said to them or was reported to them as having said, and what we ourselves recall the writer's saying to us at a party, or during the question period at one of the Friday afternoon gatherings. And so on and so forth.

It is easy to forget this, in the interests of stability.

It is easy for things to settle down into a sort of wedge, an approximate working definition of someone with whom we have been contiguous, whether briefly or over an extended period, or a much more elaborate definition, one at least with much more elaborate transactions behind it, such as we find when we go to a substantial dictionary article in search of “facts” about, say, Poe and his writings.

V

But really we should always start out suspiciously, or at least not wholly trustingly, not because we think there's always some guilty secret or fatal untruth to be uncovered, but because we recognize how those generalized constructs (“Poe's thought”) *are* simply constructs;

—that they are the result of numerous readings or misreadings by a variety of persons looking at texts (“The Black Cat,” a relative's comments garnered by a Charleston journalist in 1855, and so on),

—that there are no definitive accounts to be found anywhere,

—and that there is simply no substitute for reading the texts oneself, with the assistance, if needs be, of other texts that one is inclined to put some trust in, whether a comment by a critic or friend whose opinions one has come to take seriously (at least they aren't obviously dumb) or an entry for a word in a dictionary, or even, with a good deal more than a grain of salt (since all of us can misremember or oversimplify), what the author her/himself has said in print about a work.

VI

So, back to the “fact” of this handful of texts to which the name “Mallarmé” (but it could have been Blériot, or Dupuis, or Inconnu) is attached, and which we know to have been published/written in the 1860s by someone born in 1844.

(Well, not quite. The text of “Le Pitre châtié” is later and a good deal different from the manuscript one that we have from the 1860s, and which I am *deliberately* withholding from you at the moment, and which I do *not* want you to go in quest of to find out what the poem “really” means).

Read them, pencil in hand, consulting your dictionary and (with discretion) the translations from Flores, and doing the usual formalist things like marking caesuras, and the ends of sentences, and underlining striking phrasing, and seeing whether the start of a new stanza follows naturally from the end of the previous one or represents some kind of jump.

VII

I suppose that in effect I'm saying (among other things) make your own translation of each poem, or at least the kind of approximative translation, with options and uncertainties, that exists partly in one's head.

This is always a good way *into* a poem, insofar as it requires one to understand at an elementary level how particular phrasings come to mean what they appear to mean, and to recognize when one is puzzled by that relationship.

VIII

As I said last time, a Martian or Venusian might be puzzled on being told that some politician has a chip on his shoulder.

And a conscientious French person trying to translate a passage from *Macbeth* might be pulled up short when Lady Macbeth says, “But screw your courage to the sticking point/ And we’ll not fail,” or Macduff says, apropos of the just-reported killing of his wife and children “What, all my pretty chickens and their dam/ At one fell swoop.”

And if you were to offer the normal airy approximation, he/she might still persist and say, “But why ‘screw’? I know that you can screw something that is loose to something that is firm, like a post or wall. But how can you screw something to a point? And is this point here one that is sticking itself or that sticks other things? Also (please forgive my ignorance of your lovely language), why does Macduff say *swoop*? Does a fell swoop mean a fallen one? Is fell a participle? What, please is falling here?”, etc etc.

IX

Again, rehearse (as distinct from actually speaking out all of them for the tape) your own recording of each poem, to test how well you are now in possession of it. And record some actual lines.

X

You don’t have to set out with the belief that these are *necessarily* great poems, or *necessarily* entirely successful ones, any more than one should when reading any poem by anyone.

Wait and see. Attend. Listen. It might help to hear/read them with poems by Baudelaire and Verlaine in one’s mind’s ear. Poems, like individual words, become partly defined in relation to others that they overlap in some ways and yet differ from in others.

“Les fenêtres,” one might say on a first reading, is rather “Baudelairean.” But what might one mean by that? And if it had been published anonymously, would you wish to argue that it was in fact *by*

the author of the poems by Baudelaire, such as “Au Lecteur,” that we have discussed?

Again, how does “Brise marine” differ from the first part of Baudelaire’s “Le voyage”? And might you feel that the author of “Soupir” had read “Clair de lune”, or vice versa?

XI

After Christmas we’ll consider a handful of the more difficult poems by Mallarmé.

1994

“Suspiciousness”

(1994)

I

Some afterthoughts apropos of suspiciousness, a word that I don't really care for much here:

It's occurred to me that what I was trying to talk about when I said that you should read those poems of Mallarmé's suspiciously might be compared to the state of mind in which one drives a car in city traffic.

II

If one's done a reasonable amount of driving, one presumably isn't in a chronic state of wheel-gripping fear that every other car in a position to do so is about to run into one's own, or that one's brakes are going to fail.

By and large, as one knows from experience, other drivers respect stop-lights and the conventions of four-way signs, don't tailgate, don't fall asleep at the wheel, and one's car slows down when one presses on the appropriate pedal.

At the same time, one doesn't, or shouldn't, entirely forget the possibility that things can go wrong at almost any point—that there is no *certainty* that another driver will know who has the right of way at an intersection or that one's brakes will always work perfectly. (Mine failed completely on me a couple of years ago.)

III

Moreover, unless there is no other traffic at all and no pedestrians around, one will never be in the “same” situation each time one comes to a familiar intersection, such as the one by the Holiday Inn at Robie and Quinpool. One has to focus each time on the specific configuration that is there at that point—this car here, that bus there, those pedestrians.

Nor is a “street” always the same sort of thing, any more than a “text” is. Spring Garden by the Lord Nelson is not the same sort of thing as Oakland Road outside my house, and both are very different again from the Bicentennial Highway.

And the conventions governing how one is supposed to drive have no *innate* underpinnings.

Posted speed limits can and do alter (50 kph here, 60, 80, or 100 there), and are totally human constructions. There is no divine law by virtue of which the speed limit on a particular stretch of road *has* to be 50 rather than 70 or 47 or 29.35.

And road signs may be hard to interpret (*where* is one meant to turn off for Lawrencetown), and maps may be hard to read, and guide-books may be (or so one finds) unreliable.

And deciding when it is safe to overtake on a narrow two-lane highway may be a difficult matter, requiring the rapid processing of a number of variables in one’s mental computer.

IV

Types of drivers may vary too. For some, rules are simply there to be broken if he or she can get away with it. (Might one call them romantics?) For others, the rules must be followed exactly, even at three in the morning on deserted streets, or when there is a line-up of angrily honking cars behind one’s own.

All this is very different from “driving” as it may appear to a comfortably inattentive non-driver, I mean someone who doesn’t know how to drive, who sits chatting in the passenger seat as if he were sitting in a train seat, borne effortlessly along in a seemingly immutable and infallible system.

But it is in fact how things are, and recognizing how those things are, which is to say the real rules of the game, does not entail any metaphysical doubting or result in any kind of paralysis with regard to getting expeditiously from one end of the city to the other at rush hour.

V

Driving, like reading, is a whole lot of things, a whole lot of transactions in which one deploys a variety of skills and mentally fits a succession of present configurations in among past ones.

Driving, like reading, is *possible*.

And it may even be possible, at times, to recognize when one has made a mistake oneself, and to say confidently that someone else is a good driver, or a very good driver, or a bad one.

1994

Reading Hopkins: I (1994)

I

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–89) died of typhoid. It can be a struggle to remember this.

When a gifted and intense nineteenth-century poet dies in his prime, it is natural to assume that he or she died of tuberculosis, or some other wasting and literary disease, and that his or her life was shaped in part by the foreknowledge that it would be a brief one.

But Hopkins was simply struck down. So one shouldn't too lightly construct a scenario of earlier intensity, a later flagging of creativity, and an appropriately melancholy and foredoomed conclusion.

We simply don't *know* what his career would have looked like had he lived, say, until he was seventy, which would have brought him to 1914.

II

Hopkins was born a couple of years after Mallarmé, who also died abruptly and before his time.

Both were, professionally, teachers of the unintellectual young—Mallarmé in his *lycées*, Hopkins (during his later years) inside the Jesuit order. Both found that work demanding and tiring.

The body of *serious* poetry by each was slim.

Both were fascinated by the craft of verse, and by language.

Both could be *very* obscure. Mallarmé's French was *pas Français* at times, Hopkins' English un-English, or at least not "proper" English.

Neither man rushed to publication. Mallarmé continued tinkering with works for years, and all but a handful of Hopkins' poems remained unpublished until almost thirty years after his death.

III

Hopkins became a literal priest of religion, Mallarmé a figurative one of art, as in his “Tuesdays” in his apartment the Rue de Rome.

Both were *strange*.

Being an *English* Catholic (as distinct from an Irish or Continental one) was an odd business, given the long and intense English hostility to Catholicism as a religion of tyranny and treason.

Becoming not only a convert but a priest was even odder, as though a gifted present-day poet were to become a hard-core Scientologist.

As for Mallarmé, apparently a fair amount of fun was made of him in the popular French press once the younger *Symbolistes* got under way in the 1880s and he himself became more visible.

IV

No doubt this list of loose analogies could be extended.

But what most concerns me here is that with both poets, and in the commentaries on them, one can have the sensation of stepping into special and rather intimidating zones where somehow the “normal” rules of poetry (whatever *they* may be) don’t apply, or only very marginally.

In part this is because of the textures of their writing, in part because of the relationships of those textures to transcendent truths and experiencings that bring into question the taken-for-granted certainties of ordinary living.

Mallarmé’s sense of the void was not just intellectual posing.

Likewise, Hopkins was not just a poet who happened to be also a Catholic. He was an intensely Catholic poet in an increasingly secular period.

V

The intensity of the critical discussions of Hopkins obviously derive in part from this.

If one was a Catholic oneself, it could be not simply a source of comfort that being a Jesuit was compatible with writing major poetry. It could also be a source of anxiety because that major status had to be claimed and *defended*.

And where Hopkins' metric is concerned, there seems to me to have been a related feeling that the elusiveness of his procedures at times, and the oddness of some of his claims, were essential to his expression of more or less ineffable emotions and experiences that could not be embodied in more traditional forms.

VI

I am going to dodge talking about the religious aspects here.

Where the metrics are concerned, I want to simplify things a lot, without, I hope, *oversimplifying* them. We do *not*, at this time of year, want to get all bogged down among quasi-theoretical tangles of obscure scansion marks.

VII

So far as I have been able to figure out, to appreciate Hopkins' poems one needs to grant him, without further question, certain basic facts about his *own* verse.

At bottom, this comes down to saying that once one has determined, on the basis of some unambiguous line or set of lines, what basic number of main stresses a line in that poem should contain (five? six? four?), one must then go through the poem line by line and mark that number of stresses, and *only* that number of stresses, in each line.

I don't mean that all the other syllables in a line have *no* degrees of emphasis, so that one proceeds through a series of shouted peaks and whispered troughs.

But one must *not* start importing extra stresses into a line (usually by thinking in terms of spondees) and thereby end up with varying numbers of primary stresses.

VIII

What in effect this means is that one must abandon, or go against the grain of, two of what are likely to be one's normal ways of proceeding.

One is to begin with one's own generalized sense of how (drawing on one's own English) one would "naturally" stress something.

Another is to bring into play one's basic sense of iambic rhythms and all the substitutions that accentual-syllabic verse permits.

There are *no* spondees in Hopkins' sprung rhythm, nor are there iambs or anapests.

In a five-stresses poem, there are always five "stressed" syllables and *only* five such syllables per line. The other syllables all group themselves in subordinate relationships to the stressed ones.

They group themselves, technically, into feet—one-syllable, two-syllable, three-syllable, four-syllable, occasionally more-than-four-syllable feet, in which the stressed syllable is the *first* one in the foot.

IX

The two-syllable, three-syllable, and four-syllable feet can be thought of, respectively, as trochees, dactyls, and fourth paeons. I forget the term for a one-syllable foot.

A poem can *open* with an unstressed syllable, as in the first line of "The Windhover," but once we have the first stressed syllable ("I *caught* this morning..."), the feet start too, and they are always "falling" rather than "rising" feet.

If a line happens to end with a stressed syllable, there will probably be an unstressed syllable or two at the start of the next line that can attach themselves to it.

X

All this may seem more than a little odd when taken in by the mind alone, especially since rising rhythms (iambs and anapests) are much the most common in English verse.

One wants to see Hopkins' lines as basically iambic/anapestic, with substitutions. This is what he means, I think, when he speaks of "counterpoint." But, as I have said, one must *not* so see them.

And so long as one gets one's stress-count right, one doesn't have to worry about feet at all, so far as I can see, at least when *reading* his verse. I have no idea what trying to write it would be like.

But I suspect, now that I come to think about it, that just as there are auditory limits to how long a line in English can be and still be a unit (rather than breaking mechanically into two or more parts), so there are natural limits as to how many unstressed syllables can be grouped with a stressed one before one of them rises to equal prominence.

The normal limit of *sounded* syllables (as distinct from ones that are there for the eye only) is probably four.

So Hopkins' four basic feet *are* there, and no doubt his mind's ear was conscious of patterns of contracted and expanded feet.

A line consisting of four one-syllable one-stress feet would be very different from one made up of four *four*-syllable ones.

XI

Paradoxically, once one gets down to cases, all this works pretty well, at least in Hopkins.

It works because the stresses are related to meaning in determinable ways, since what we are being given are speech-stressings, as in the differences between "Look at the white house" (two ways of stressing that, actually) and "Look at the White House."

Hopkins obviously had a fine ear for such distinctions.

And to honour his intentions in fact makes his verse *more* accessible and *more* precise, because doing away with the generalized boom and clatter that come when you thump down on syllable after syllable because that is how “common sense” tells you each should be said in an excited state of mind.

In that kind of reading, individual words (and perhaps concepts) are likely to be given an unnatural prominence, as in a phrasing like “dáp-ple-dáwn-dráwn fá-lcon.”

In Hopkins’ own reading, if I am correct, only *one* of the first three words is stressed. The meaning is the meaning of the phrasal unit that they compose, as in an idiomatic statement like “He was caught red-há-nded.”

XII

I don’t mean that one can always be certain as to where the stresses are meant to go. Nor am I defending this system as one that others can use with relative ease.

In fact very few poets indeed, possibly none, appear to have taken over Hopkins’s system and applied it precisely, as distinct from throwing loose handfuls of stresses at the reader as ways of signalling states of excitement.

I am simply pointing to what, so far as I have been able to determine, is there to be found in Hopkins own poems.

XIII

I *don’t* feel that we need to agonize over the terminology. I also feel that one doesn’t have to go into a decline because one can’t figure out how to mark a line. The fact that there may be exceptions at times, or that at times Hopkins may seem to be making excessive demands on his reader’s ear and patience if things are to come out right, does not negate what I have been saying.

I am of course assuming that one’s markings are preparations for reading the poem from start to finish aloud (scorings, as it were), and that one may be moving back and forth between voice and eye while

making one's marks, or at least putting marks over syllables about which one would otherwise be in doubt.

XIV

I am providing for the 5510 file a copy of a long strong paper (40 pages of the *smaller* of the two ordinary typefaces) done twenty years ago for this seminar. I'm also providing a handful of good pages from that paper for those who don't have the time or patience (nor need they) to read the whole thing.

XV

Lastly, I'm providing a mini-selection of Hopkins material for you to mark up.

As part of the preparation for next time, scan the last two poems ("Spring and Fall" and "The Windhover") in the way that I have specified.

We may well find that there are disagreements and uncertainties as to where the stress marks should go. That's fine.

But if you simply go by your "feeling" for a line, or by the kinds of scansion systems that we've been familiarizing ourselves with this year, you will learn little of use from the experience, except that Hopkins is "difficult."

XVI

The point of all this, of course, is the poetry.

But one cannot deal with this with any precision if one cannot see what is being said in a line at a *literal* level. And one cannot do that without hearing Hopkins' speech-based stresses.

XVII

As I've said before, my impression is that he is always pointing to things with a hoped-for precision.

In the second stanza of “The Wreck of the Deutschland,” not included here, he writes, “I did say yes/ O at lightning and lashed rod.”

Normally one expects a rod to be doing the lashing. But in fact, as I realized recently, the rod here is the birch-rod or birch, so-called, of nineteenth-century English public schools like Eton.

The birch-rod in fact consisted of several switches from a birch tree tied together at the base (“lashed”), like a sort of stiff arboreal cat-o-nine-tails.

In another of his poems he speaks of kissing the rod. That too, apparently, was part of the ritual of punishment with this implement.

[For some comments on “Spring,” see Afternote, below.]

XVIII

At times, too, what looks like an oddity in stressing may be odd only because of subsequent linguistic changes.

When Hopkins himself stresses “Margaret” as “Márgarét,” the odds are that at that time the word, at least in some parts of Britain, was stressed more as though it were French. I say “in some parts,” because there was a lot more linguistic regionalism then.

I myself have also thought for a long time now that in the celebrated opening line of “God’s Grandeur” (“The world is charged with the grandeur of God”), “grandeur” should have the stress on the second syllable.

XIX

Hopkins can still be opaquely difficult at times, like Mallarmé.

But it helps to feel, as one tries to tease out the meaning, that this is not because he had been writing on some kind of spiritual acid high.

In this connection, look at his prose explication, on the final page, of a few of his lines. I’d call it Crane-like, except that Crane was obviously Hopkins-like in that passage of his that we glanced at.

XX

As to the term “inscape,” I suggest that you try thinking of the differences between a non-gardener, ignorant even of the names of flowers and trees, who looks at a garden, and an informed and avid gardener who does so.

The former may well enjoy what is before her/his eyes (taking pictures, picking flowers, stretching out prone or supine under a tree).

But the latter will perceive that system of growth from the inside, as it were—will know what all those growing things are, and at what stages they are in their cycles, and what makes them happy with respect to sun and shade and water, and which ones are really doing well, and which may have problems, and what kinds of changings and prunings may be necessary.

She/he knows what this particular birch here is like, and that particular one over there.

He/she could also, if necessary, *describe* with some precision what he/she sees.

The latter, I would say, grasps the “inscape” of the garden.

XXI

The appended prose piece by Hopkins about the movements of water on a particular beach give us some idea (apart from the evidence of the poems themselves) of how he went about trying to feel his way into natural phenomena, the particularities of this physical but not *merely* physical world of ours that he so much relished and could make so real in a lot of his poems.

Nature there is a system of energies and processes, not just of appearances masking a realer reality—perhaps, even, the reality of a void.

XXII

Of course bleaker times came for him, in part, I imagine, because of the sheer exhaustion resulting from conscientiously lecturing to and grading a lot of uninspiring students (see *A Portrait of the Artist* for the ambience of University College, Dublin), and we have the so-called terrible sonnets, written when he was painfully conscious of how his ability to feel the inscape of things was flagging and fading.

These are generally, and I think correctly, rated highly in his oeuvre, and can make that pain feel very real.

But it is worth remembering that they are *sonnets*, and that even a poem as wild, to an initial glance, as “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” is a sonnet.

Hopkins may allude to *King Lear* in one of them, but he was not in fact Lear on the heath. and the exuberantly experimental and affirmative “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire” appears to have been written a year or two *after* the terrible sonnets.

XXIII

In your recordings for next time, let’s try an experiment. Let’s have two of you make individual recordings of “Spring and Fall,” three make recordings of the octave of “Carrion Comfort,” and two make recordings of “The Leaden Echo,” in which last-named poem the rules that I’ve been outlining, and which *must* be followed in the first two sets of recordings, don’t apply and free emotion is the order of the day.

Consult with one another if you wish when you’re trying to score the texts. You can record other poems or passages as well if you wish. But it will be interesting to see how much agreement there is in the readings-aloud of the poems I’ve named. I suspect that there’ll be quite a bit.

1994

Afternote

I’ve said that Hopkins is always pointing at real phenomena.

Here, for example, is the octave of “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.

[Taken from "Powers of Style" XXVIII, in "Voices in the Cave of Being," www.jottings.ca].

Reading Hopkins: II

(1994)

I

In view of how interesting your Eliot tapings were, I've concluded that I shouldn't have been so prescriptive about what you do with Hopkins.

So, record what poems and/or passages intrigue you—what seem to you interesting challenges.

However, will we really need more than two recordings of the same poem/passage? I mean, some diversifying would be nice.

And wouldn't it be helpful if each of you were to provide the rest of us with a photocopy of what you've recorded, with the requisite number of stresses in each line marked, so that we can check your performance against the score, as it were? Don't bother to mark unstressed (or "slack") syllables, though.

II

I have checked the poems on the handout sheets with the texts in the Fourth Edition. They're virtually identical.

I have also obtained the presumably definitive 1990 edition, *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Norman H. Mackenzie. A number of other markings by Hopkins himself are included in it. These will be there to be referred to, if anyone wishes, next Monday.

Oh yes, and the marks on the small-print "Windhover" are mostly ones that I'd put there myself and failed to erase.

III

I have also done what I should have done earlier, and checked what the notes in my old Penguin edition had to say about which of the poems are in Sprung Rhythm. The groups into which the poems appear to fall are as follows:

Standard rhythm

The Habit of Perfection, In Honour of St Alphonsus Rodriguez

Standard rhythm with counterpointing

God's Grandeur, The Starlight Night, In the Valley of the Elwy,
Thou art indeed just, Lord

Standard rhythm with some springing

Spring, No worst, there is none

Sprung rhythm

The Windhover, Felix Randal, Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves, Carrion
Comfort, That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire, Duns Scotus's Oxford,
Spring and Fall.

The notes don't say about the others, but I take it that Inversnaid
and The Leaden Echo are both in Sprung Rhythm.

IV

I also thought I'd better let you have some of Hopkins own words
about his procedures, in case you were to wonder what I was hiding
from you (or trying to shield you from).

The Author's Preface, as you will see from the footnote, was done five
or six years before Hopkins' death.

V

Doing this cut-and-pasting caused me to do what I should have done
earlier and re-read what he said.

I was interested to see that some of the things that I told you were
simply wrong.

I was wrong about the opening line of "God's Grandeur," for example.

I did not point out that not all the poems are in Sprung Rhythm.

I was wrong about counterpointing. Hopkins (I think) reserves that term for places in a basically iambic poem where one has two or more substitute trochees adjoining one another, as in the first line of “God’s Grandeur.”

His point is that one still tries to read such lines as if they were iambic, and so has two rhythms co-existing.

I found interesting his statement that it is very uncommon in English poetry for there to be reversals in the second and the final foot.

VI

I was also wrong when I said that a (sprung) line consisting of four monosyllabic feet would move faster than one containing more syllables per foot.

At least this seems not to have been how Hopkins himself saw it.

For him, the former would be spoken more slowly than the latter, the latter more rapidly than the former, so that there would, at least in theory, be an approximate equivalence in duration.

This is obviously true of “Ding Dong Bell” with its steady strong beat throughout.

VII

However, I think I lucked out in one regard.

What I prescriptively said about stresses does appear to apply to *all* these poems, whether in sprung rhythm or not.

Hopkins himself says nothing about spondees and pyrrhics, and talks as though a standard English foot, by definition, has a principal stress and only one such stress.

And when I went through the poems pencil in hand, and took into account the additional markings in the recent edition, by and large what I desiderated worked.

There are indeed a number of problems and anomalies with Hopkins' scansion, as Norman Mackenzie, the leading textual expert on Hopkins, freely acknowledges. Hopkins was evidently not always self-consistent in what he said and did.

But still, I found that for the most part I could come up with the right number of stresses, and that the stressing (and non-stressings) were meaning-related (as in "God's Grandeur," for example, and that the poems were coming more alive for me as speech as I made my way through them in this fashion.

VIII

In ordinary speech, as we know, there are differences in meaning between different stressings:

Smith: "He says you gave him some money in the Seventies."

Jones: "I *never* gave him any money."

Smith: "Not even a few dollars?"

Jones: "I never gave him *any* money."

Smith: "He was very positive about it."

Jones: "I repeat: I *never gave* him *any money*."

Note how in the first "I never..." one has virtually only one stress, in the second, one or two, in the third, four. At least that is how it comes out for me when I speak Jones's lines aloud as if in a conversation. Which is to say, *perform* them.

It helps here to think of gents talking in British movies.

IX

Or again, a literary old British gent reminiscing before the TV camera might recall of some then-unpublished writer at the outset of his career that "He was a very angry young man at that time."

He might also say of the same writer when he was better known, “He was in his Angry Young Man mode by then.”

In the second statement we have a natural phrasal unit of four syllables, of which the first is stressed and the others not—a compound epithet (“*Angry-young-man*”). In the first statement, there are more stresses.

X

A problem at times with all this is that whereas in ordinary accentual-syllabic verse we can usually tell how this or that bit of phrasing goes metrically, and then proceed from there to infer what kind of meaning and feeling are being conveyed, with Hopkins the process may be reversed.

We can find ourselves trying to figure out what is being said *in order to decide* what syllables should be emphasized.

XI

When we come to Wordsworth’s line “Never did sun more beautifully steep...,” we know that we have to say “*Never*” and not “*Never,*” and that, on reflection, we have a metrical substitution here, and that it is related to the meaning, just as with Yeats’ “A lonely impulse of delight/ *Drove* to this tumult in the clouds.”

But unless we have extraordinarily well-attuned linguistic ears, and at times not even then, we can sometimes find ourselves with no way of determining which word or syllable should be emphasized in a line by Hopkins, particularly when we get runs of words— e.g. noun-noun-noun or adjective-adjective-adjective—that seem to have exactly the same kind of semantic significance.

For example, Hopkins own markings indicate that in the twelfth line of “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” the stresses should fall on “black” and “right”. I can sense the rightness of this now, but I’m not sure that I could articulate it, and I myself had guessed wrong.

Simply thumping on all four adjectives may be a way out of the problem but it is not what Hopkins himself evidently intended, and in

general that kind of solution simply coarsens the texture of his writing/ thinking/feeling.

XII

I trust you will get some pleasure from his numerous compound-word coinages, as in “The Starlight Night” (“fire-folk,” etc). The English language is full of “fused” compound terms (“horse-race,” as opposed to “course de chevaux,” “horseshoe” as opposed to “fer de cheval”), though they are usually not so striking or so clustered together. Often they can function as either nouns or adjectives.

Personally I find, too, that I am increasingly less worried by his omissions of various parts of speech. In “Spring,” for example, it would surely be less effective to say (“correctly”) “[The] thrush’s eggs look [like] little low heavens,” In an earlier draft, the “the” was in fact there. One commentator points out that in North American English one says, “I’ll write her tomorrow.” Which reminds me that people also say, at times, “I looked out the window.”

XIII

But of course obscurities can result when one isn’t sure of how the elements in a compound relate to one another.

Does “wind-beat” in “The Starlight Night” consist of two nouns (the beat of the wind?) or of a noun and a truncated participle (beaten by the wind)? Or both together?

Does “rollrock” in “Inversnaid” mean “rolling rocks along” (by virtue of the force of the stream) or “rolling along among rocks,” or “passing through an up-and-down rocky bed,” or...?

“Whitebeam,” by the way, is the name of a particular tree—some kind of poplar, I think. A lot of the odder words were apparently regionalisms still in use at the time—“degged,” for example, in “Inversnaid.” Hopkins, like Mallarmé, collected English words and phrases.

XIV

How much was Hopkins “entitled” to ask of a prospective reader? How much research ought *we* to be doing now? Is “twindles” in “Inversnaid” a made-up portmanteau word like “slithy” in Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwock,” or another regionalism?

I suppose what answers we give to such questions depends partly on how much trust we have in the (inferred) author of a poem with respect to what semantic money may be in his/her bank.

Which in turn may depend partly on how much is given elsewhere in the poem in the portions that we *do* understand, partly on what a sample dip or two into a large dictionary may disclose, and partly on how much work the puzzle term itself is doing.

“Twindles,” in its context in “Inversnaid,” feels like a portmanteau fusion of “twists” and “dwindles,” and what Hopkins has done earlier in the poem suggests that he likes words because of their natural evocativeness.

I suspect that if we were standing with some laconic old Scotsman beside a down-rushing stream and he were to refer to “that wee bit o’ froth twindling over there,” we’d be satisfied enough with the degree of communication.

XV

On the other hand, in “The Windhover” a great deal depends on what one makes of “buckle,” and a variety of meanings have been attributed to it in support of a variety of interpretations of the poem.

Personally I am grateful for Winters’ dry comment, “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 in northern English, sometimes means *to marry*. In this sense, the word would function as well as it would in any other sense.”

But this reading does not make it into Mackenzie’s notes, I see. Winters himself ends by saying, “What the word actually means in the poem, I confess I do not know” (*Function of Criticism*, 134).

XVI

As to the discussion next time, you will have, so far as I can see, close to the full two hours for it. How should you fill that time? Oh, I suppose by talking about Hopkins.

You have a very representative selection in front of you, containing a lot of his best known—and best—poems. What is he like? What are *they* like? What do you, I mean you-as-individual-reader, make of him and them?

I am truly going to stay out of the discussion for a good while. I have no idea how you will react to him (or, if you prefer, to these texts). I shall be curious to find out.

I do hope that you will anchor the discussion, from time to time, in particular texts and passages. At times the past discussions have seemed to float at a curious distance from actual “inscaped” texts.

XVII

Some possible questions for consideration:

Which of the poems do you especially like or dislike?

Do you find yourself tilting more towards the joyous earlier poems or the more somber later ones?

Do you tend to remember the octaves more than the sestets of the sonnets?

Do you feel that Hopkins demonstrated in these poems that one *could* be a devout Catholic priest and a major poet?

What do you make of quieter poems like “In the Valley of the Elwy” and “In Honour of St. Alphonsus Rodriguez”? Are they simply ones in which his inspiration has flagged?

Do Hopkins wilder experimentings (as in “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” and “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire” succeed brilliantly? Somewhat? Not at all?

Was Hopkins a Symbolist?

Which do you yourself prefer, Hopkins or Eliot?

XVIII

When I put the words “Other Voices” on the schedule, I had in mind that with Hopkins we see a poet who was really not in the general Franco-British stream that we have been dipping into.

And yet, as my invocation of Mallarmé was intended to recall, we have in Hopkins, in his own way, a very significant measure of the strengths that we have noticed in figures like Mallarmé and Rimbaud, with respect to language (especially verbs) and its relationship to the physical but not merely physical world, and the establishment of one’s own creative space(s) in that world.

When the first generally accessible volume of his work appeared in 1930, he was enthusiastically welcomed as a modernist by a lot of the literary young, a lot of them on the Left. They may even have considered him *more* of a modernist than Eliot.

XIX

Bibliographical:

I have tottered to the library and taken a handful of books off the shelf. I should, of course, have done my homework better in the past. But I was relieved to find that my untutored linguistic speculations weren’t too much off the mark.

Kunio Shimane, *The Poetry of G.M. Hopkins: The Fusing Point of Sound and Sense*. Tokyo, Hokuseido Press, 1983. By a knowledgeable-sounding Japanese linguist and Hopkins enthusiast. A nice book. I’m providing a handful of pages from it for the file.

James Milroy, *The Language of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1977. A fine rich readable work of intelligent scholarship, of interest with respect not only to Hopkins but to language more generally. I’m providing a few pages from this too.

Two large recent biographies of Hopkins appeared within a year of one another, much to the mutual disgust of both authors, I would imagine. They are: Robert Bernard Martin, *Gerard Manley Hopkins; A Very Private Life*, N.Y., Putnam's, 1991 and Norman White, *Hopkins; a Literary Biography*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992. Martin's seems the more readable.

Mackenzie calls Edward Stephenson's, *What Sprung Rhythm Really Is*, International Hopkins Association Monograph No.4, 1987 the best book on the subject. I haven't read it and it isn't on Novanet.

1995

Reading Woolf

(1991)

I

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is difficult reading IN PLACES.

But it is plain sailing in others, and one shouldn't get into the habit of expecting difficulty and obscurity each time one embarks on a new paragraph (like expecting that someone with an imperfect grasp of one's language will be unintelligible when he or she asks one a question).

The sixty-seven pages of Part III (by the time one comes to them) are lucid. They are the most beautiful long stretch of writing in fiction in English.

Have I read all the other fiction in English? No, of course not, but I have never come upon anything resembling these pages, and if there is something finer elsewhere in English, I have no idea where it might be.

I say "in English." In French there is Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

II

The difficult parts of *To the Lighthouse* are mainly in Part I.

Sometimes to know why something that one is reading is difficult—I mean, to perceive the nature of the difficulties—is as important as knowing (or being told) what is being "said."

One or two opening tips.

Read pencil in hand and mark as you read.

Mark each time the point of view shifts from one character to another (maybe circling the names of the characters).

Mostly the shifts occur at the start of a section, picking up on some cue at the end of the previous one.

Occasionally they occur inside a section (a lot of shifting goes on in section 17 of Part I), or even inside a single paragraph.

III

While you're reading Part I, don't expect anything to "happen" in a conventional novelistic sense. The only thing that "happens" is that Paul Rayley and Minta Doyle get engaged, and they are minor characters.

IV

Read I/1 particularly carefully, not because it is especially important (there are much finer stretches later) but because it comes first in the book, and to establish a few bearings early is good practice.

Number each paragraph consecutively with a letter of the alphabet. (By my count there are 27 paragraphs.)

V

By a careful reading, I don't mean one in which one is on the alert for deep meanings, major symbols, subtle giveaways with respect to what a character is really like.

The prose of this section isn't like that.

For that matter, nor is most of the prose that follows.

Woolf is not a writer who hides her meanings and "messages." On the contrary, she keeps spelling things out.

In comparison with Mansfield, she is positively Victorian in her explicitness.

VI

The subtlety and complexity lie not in this or that particular image of symbol—she denied that she was a symbolist—but in the flow-forward of the prose and the interactions that keep occurring in it.

When I say read carefully, I am speaking of reading with an eye to how the exposition is occurring, a concern with the prose sense of what one is reading, an unworried alertness to points at which a straightforward narrative progression is lost, so that if you were asked to summarize in your own words what happens next, and next, and next you might have trouble with the sequence.

If you do not get hold of the novel at this basic level, the odds are that you will have trouble with it in other ways and enjoy it less than you might.

VII

The first time through I/1, you must keep going—keep forging forward. You mustn't stop and bog down. Parts are perfectly clear, and you will come to them.

You may wish to keep going beyond I/1. By all means do so. One learns by doing—learns (which is to say, assimilates aspects of) Woolf's "language" in this novel.

The second time through I/1, though, be more analytical.

VIII

Part of the problem with this section is that some of the sentences are long and elaborate, with multiple parentheses, and/or elaborate parallelism, and/or the development of a simple opening statement by an elaborate series of subordinate clauses and phrases hooked on to one another.

But the section is also difficult because not all the sentences are like that, so that when one embarks on a new paragraph, one can't be sure in advance what kind of structure it will have.

There may well be a run of short sentences.

However, there is a LIKELIHOOD that sentences will lengthen as a paragraph proceeds.

You don't need to take my word for that, though. Instead, take your pencil and draw lines down the sides of the paragraphs in this section to indicate the lengths of the sentences.

That way, you can have an overview and note some of the varieties of pacing and structuring that go on.

IX

Here is a sentence from the second paragraph.

(a) The wheelbarrow,

the lawn-mower,

the sound of poplar trees,

leaves whitening before rain,

rooks cawing,

brooks knocking,

dresses rustling—

all these were *so* coloured and distinguished in his mind

(b) *that* he had already

his private code,

his secret language,

(c) *though* he appeared the image of stark and uncompromising severity,

with his high forehead

and his fierce blue eyes,

(d) *so that* his mother

watching him guide his scissors neatly round the
refrigerator,

imagined him

all red and ermine on the Bench

or directing a stern and momentous enterprise

in some crisis of public affairs.

I have not indicated all the syntactical parallelism. There are four more of it.

X

Notice how in a single not very long sentence we have moved from a number of very specific concrete things at the outset to something very large and abstract (“directing a stern and momentous enterprise in some crisis of public affairs”) that one couldn’t (if asked in advance) imagine being connected with those things.

Notice, too, how it isn’t a steady progression from concrete to abstract. Elsewhere in the sentence we have shiftings between abstractions and concretions.

“Stark and uncompromising severity” is followed by “high forehead and fierce blue eyes.”

The concluding abstraction is preceded by the concrete image of a High Court judge in his fur-trimmed red robe, trying a case.

And the most specific concrete statement in the passage (“watching him guide his scissors round the refrigerator”) contrasts with the abstract immediately-following phrase “imagined him.”

XI

How are things held together syntactically? Or, more poetically, how does Woolf work her magic? Or, more prosaically, how does she bring the trick off?

In effect we have several different areas or units here, which I have tried to indicate with my spacing. Several different “facts,” perhaps. Here is a rewriting of the sentence.

The wheelbarrow,

the lawn-mower,

the sound of poplar trees,

leaves whitening before rain,

rooks cawing,

brooms knocking,

dresses rustling—

all these were coloured and distinguished in his mind.

He had already

his private code,

his secret language.

But he appeared the image of stark and uncompromising severity,

with his high forehead

and his fierce blue eyes.

His mother

watched him guide his scissors neatly round the refrigerator.

She imagined him

all red and ermine on the Bench
or directing a stern and momentous enterprise
in some crisis of public affairs.

Woolf has linked these things together with relational terms—“so ... that,” “so,” “so that.” They are brief and colourless ones, and can be missed with a blink of the eyes.

XII

Woolf has also shifted here from one kind of statement or information-giving to another.

In (a) and (b) we are told how things actually were inside his mind generally (not just at this particular moment.) It is a complete piece of information-giving.

After that we get tack-ons—additional pieces of information that are not (logically) essential to the main piece.

First we get a shift to how he looked in general—how anyone might have seen him.

Then we shift to how *she* felt, and we're off and away into a process that could continue indefinitely with further hook-ons and parentheses.

There's no syntactical reason, in fact, why, once we're inside her imaginings, her anticipatings, her associatings, her recollectings, the sentence couldn't keep on swelling to novel length, particularly if the narrator is free to interject parenthetically, from time to time, how things “really” were—or, for that matter, how other *people* viewed things.

(Try it. Expand the sentence. Or make up one of your own. Astonish us. One can do wonders with words like “seemed,” “appeared,” “imagined”—and with “as if” and “like.”

XIII

One reason why things move smoothly inside the sentence is that the assertion about his appearing an image of uncompromising severity moves us into how things *look*, and it is a simple step from there to an explicit statement about how they looked to *her*.

The perception of his severity is a fairly personal one (not everyone might see him that way), and we have a kind of stylistic hovering between how things seem to the author (who's letting us know) and how they seem to a character.

That's enough about a single sentence.

But oh yes, also note the translating of complex mental processes into spatial terms with the word "coloured"—coloured as with areas on a map, presumably. And also notice how the sentence changes direction a little under half-way through. A number of her paragraphs are like that.

XIV

All the features that I've been pointing to are to be found throughout Part I, often on a larger scale or with greater intensity.

Sentences swell with the aid of semi-colons and parenthesis-marks.

A metaphor/simile/analogy—which may be explicitly created by a character or be an authorial translating into concrete terms of how things *felt* to a character—pulls important things together and reappears later. ("Onward to R!" "The brass scimitar smote," etc).

And there are related difficulties.

At times, the points of view shift abruptly in puzzling ways. One was at point X, suddenly one is at point Y, and one isn't sure how one got there.

At times, too, one isn't sure when something's being said out loud, or said inside someone's head, or *thought* (without being verbalized) by someone, or an authorial communication.

XV

But even when there are difficult passages, there don't seem to me to be mysteries.

In this novel we're never inside some kind of novelistic *Last Year at Marienbad* or *Rashomon*, where whether or not something happened at all is in doubt. (Did the vase *really* break? Is Pierre merely *imagining* it breaking? Etc).

Nor are there irreconcilable differences between people's accounts at a basic factual level.

We don't have one character saying that they had bacon for breakfast, another saying no, it was porridge, and we the readers having no principled way of choosing between them.

There are indeed problem novels like that—Beckett's, for example, and Alain Robbe-Grillet's. But Woolf isn't that kind of novelist in *To the Lighthouse*, and perhaps not anywhere.

XVI

I make these points in part to counteract a tendency one has to feel that since Part I is the most *difficult* part of the novel it must therefore be the most profound, and that the difficult parts of Part I must be the best parts of it; a tendency, too, when reading the clear parts, to look below the surface in search of clues and symptoms, rather than looking at what Woolf in fact so clearly and firmly does.

A good deal of the time she's obviously asking (qua narrator) to be read literally.

IV

Referentiality and Stanley Fish (1993)

I

It occurs to me that one way of coping with a Fishean reading of that blackboard text might be to keep asking “How?” It’s not a bad way of coping with *any* reading of a text, one’s own reading(s) included.

(For that and other texts mentioned here, see Texts at the end of this piece.)

II

If you’re out driving with that still useful fiction the Enquiring Martian, and you stop when you come to a stop sign, (s)he asks you why you stopped.

There was a stop sign, you say.

A stop sign?

Yes, you explain, that octagonal red shape on top of a post with the word STOP on it. The word STOP conventionally means, “Cease what you’re doing,” and what *we’re* doing is driving.

But how do we know that that’s what the word means?

I’ll show you a dictionary when we get home.

Could the sign have been put there as a prank? Or by an art student doing a piece of conceptual sculpture?

Well, yes, it *could* have been, but it doesn’t seem likely. Let’s go back and look at it. Look at the metal, the kind of paint, the weathering, the words “City of Halifax” stamped on the back, the concrete base. Making it and installing it would have taken some time.

But *still* couldn’t some obsessed artists have put it there?

Yes, they *could* have, but it seems highly improbable.

III

Well, how do I know you're telling me the truth about stop signs?

OK, let's watch out for other such signs and see how drivers behave when they come to them.

Yes, they do stop, but what about this woman standing in the roadway with a yellow hat on and holding a sign with "Stop" on it?

She's a member of a road crew.

But mightn't she be a member of a gang engaged in some criminal activity?

She *could* be, but look at the other signs, the men at work on the road, the cop car parked beside the road.

Yes, but....

OK, rent yourself a car and ignore all the Stop signs you come to and see what happens.

IV

Or take the Martian (in traction?) and the Wordsworth/Winters sonnet which you read out to the Martian and which goes as follows:

From low to high doth dissolution climb,
 And sink from high to low, along a scale
 Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;
A musical but melancholy chime,
Which they can hear who meddle not with crime,
 Nor avarice, nor over anxious care.
 Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear
The longest date do melt like frosty rime,
That in the morning whiten'd hill and plain
And is no more; drop like 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.

Excuse me, says the Martian, but I seemed to hear some odd repeated sounds as you read that out. Is the writer perhaps trying to send a message in code? The English sounds strange at times, too.

So you explain to her/him/it that this is a sonnet, written in England a good while ago, and (anticipating being asked how you know that) allow the Martian to look at the Norton Anthology where you found it.

Yes, I see, says the Martian. Other people have indeed written texts with those characteristics. But why is this particular one in this book.

Well, you say, it's an important poem by a great writer. It's saying important things about important topics—dissolution, truth, time.

May we examine what it says? says the Martian.

Of course.

V

So you walk yourself and the Martian through the syntax and diction of the text, referring it/him/her, when necessary, to dictionaries and to the principles of English syntax (nouns, verbs, pronouns, participles, modifiers, parallelism, parentheses as displayed at work in this poem and (for naturally the Martian keeps questioning) in other poems in the anthology, and various pieces of prose, and the way you and the Martian are speaking right now.

And you try to answer questions like, “But how do we *know* that the grammatical subject of ‘drop’ is ‘her outward forms’” or “How do we *know* that a typesetter didn’t accidentally omit a noun after ‘low’ and another after ‘high’ in the first line?”

You patiently go on introducing examples of various kinds, both real and hypothetical, for purposes of comparison and contrast.

And you suggest that where “knowing” something is concerned, it is better to think in terms of degrees of probability, rather than of a dichotomy of total truth and total indeterminacy.

VI

A few days later, the Martian says:

“You told me last time that the sonnet was important and helped me to see what statements are being made in it. But we did not talk about whether, in your opinion, those statements are true.

Since our last conversation, I have read a discussion of the poem by someone called Yvor Winters. To me, at least, his objections and questions seem valid.

Could you tell me, please, what you yourself think of each of them. If you think most of them are sound, can the poem really be a good one, let alone a great one.

I would appreciate it if we could discuss each of his points in sequence and then go on to that broader question.”

Hmmm???

VII

A few weeks later the recuperating Martian is in the library and falls into conversation with someone who had been in that famous class of Fish’s.

The individual writes down the Fishean poem for the Martian on a library slip and proceeds enthusiastically to explicate it, along the lines we see in Fish’s passage. (We had better assume here that the expounder has not read Fish’s account of that class.)

The Martian, as you would expect by now, proceeds courteously but persistently to interrogate the Fishean as to how he/she knows this and, more to the point, *how* the six jotted-down words “mean” what the explicator has just said they mean.

I will leave it to you to think of what kinds of questions the Martian might ask, what kinds of answers the explicator might give, and what kinds of evidence the explicator might adduce in support of those answers.

VIII

But did the students in Fish's class all go on saying those kinds of things to each other in private afterwards, I wonder? Did none of them have second thoughts? Had none knowingly engaged in the exercise as play? Had none of them sat there mute and sceptical?

I doubt it. At least, I'd like to think that doubt here would be reasonable.

I also doubt that had Fish tried the "poem" out on some of his fellow seventeenth-century scholars he would have had the same results.

Which is a not insignificant consideration.

IX

Fish as a theorist depends heavily on the concept of "communities" of readers, and there is truth to that.

One can indeed talk about—may *have* to talk about—the kinds of readers that a poem appears to be intended for, just as one can talk about the readership of different kinds of magazines.

But to call something a community doesn't mean that it's a cluster of clones, any more than are the inhabitants of an English village, or the members of an extended family.

There can be wide divergences in belief and behaviour inside an extended family, some of whose members may in fact detest one another.

The Dalhousie Department of English is a community, but its members have been far from all thinking and feeling in the same way about literature, so far as my own thirty-some years experience of it goes.

X

So when Fish goes on to maintain that because each "interpretive" community reads a text in its own specific fashion *and cannot help doing so*, each community-specific reading is therefore right for that

community and no one reading can be considered truer than any other, he seems to me to be departing from any reality that I myself am acquainted with.

Or rather, to be misrepresenting realities that I *am* acquainted with.

XI

Of course there are wide varieties of communities, and some, such as the U.S. Marine Corps, do indeed work at getting a high degree of uniformity among its members (albeit a uniformity that permits of a high degree of self-reliance on the part of individual members when cut off from their fellows).

But when we call an extended family a community we are likely to mean that, as with physical characteristics, there is *some* sharing among *some* members of *some* kinds of knowledge, facts, myths, and modes of communicating, together with a good deal of diverging and mutual ignorance.

XII

If there *weren't* divergences inside a human community, it couldn't evolve.

And a benign evolution, which is likely to be partly a response to changing conditions not of the community's own making, seems to me inseparable from the concept of truth, the making of truth claims, and the examining of those claims.

Fish writes, elsewhere, as if individuals' attitudes were programmed and set in the way that those of the vast majority of species are, and as if interrelations were simply an affair of a sought dominance and submission.

But when one person is persuaded by another's arguments, comments, and less definable reactions to change her/his opinion about something, it is because he/she has been shown something that had previously escaped her/his gaze.

XIII

By “shown,” here, I don’t just mean that an assertion has been made. I mean that an assertion has stood up to interrogation, perhaps interrogation by a number of individuals, and that it “works.”

Certainly this happens for myself in this seminar.

As a result of what someone else in our tiny *ad hoc* community has said or written, I can see that some word or statement in a poem means something different from what I had hitherto assumed, or that some scansion of mine was incorrect, or that I had simply not noticed some interesting fact.

And I would say that I now *know* something that I didn’t before.

XIV

Of course things get more complicated with larger questions of interpretation and value judgments, and obviously it is impossible for any of us to experience a poem in identical fashions. But we can still experience something in *somewhat* the same way.

Fish’s famous question, “Is There a Text in This Class?” might seem to invite the flesh-creeping post-modern answer “No.” But of course there are texts—i.e., clusters of alphabet characters arranged, normally, in horizontal lines.

Despite all the editorial doings, the text of *Macbeth* in the First Folio is still, or so I seem to recall, remarkably close to the up-to-date ones. Nor are there disagreements about a lot of facts.

No-one would get very far who wanted to argue that King Duncan was in fact murdered by Banquo in drag (the real Lady Macbeth having been kidnapped by Macduff) and that Macbeth failed to see this because (a) he was hopelessly alcoholic and (b) his eyesight had badly deteriorated but he was too proud to acknowledge the fact even to himself (“Is this a dagger that I see before me?”).

Moreover, different kinds of accounts are not necessarily in conflict with each other.

An account of how the time of day and the weather matter in the play would not necessarily conflict with an account of the workings of guilt in Macbeth's psyche.

XV

No, the problems come for the most part when someone makes value judgments and/or tries to offer a totalizing account of a work (their "interpretation" of it) and claim that it is the only valid one—that their *Macbeth* or their "Au Lecteur" is the only "real" work.

But entering the lists on behalf of one's own totalizing account of a work and defending it against all comers seems to me far from being the only valid way of proceeding.

One can also *collaborate* with others in the task of assembling and animating the bare-bones words on the page or blackboard, or which is more common, trying to get more substance and order into one's own initial impressions of a work by seeing what others say about it.

And the making of value judgments can have a heuristic function.

XVI

When I myself say, with pseudo-arrogance, that such-and-such a poem is simply the best in a group, I mean, usually, that it is what holds up best for me out of the group and gives promise of continuing to do so.

But I'm not just reporting on my feelings, which of course are unarguable, as in an exchange like "'I love chocolate.' 'No, I don't.'"

I mean, rather, that if pressed I could, I feel, point to particular features of the work itself, or at least come to perceive them under the pressure of discussion, that would help explain why, for me, that work *does* stand up best.

But I'm also aware that my mind may change with the passing of time, and that in the course of a discussion I may come to see weaknesses in my own favorite, and/or strengths in someone else's, that I had overlooked.

XVII

In what used to be a well-known paradigm, F.R. Leavis said that responsible discussions of literary texts implicitly have the form of, ““This is so, isn’t it?” ‘Yes, but...’” It’s the “Isn’t it?” and the “but” that really matter here.

No doubt the answer could also be, “Yes, of course,” or, “No, certainly not.”

One of the things that I like about Leavis and Winters is that they demonstrate in their own judgments that responsible disagreements with received opinions, including ones that “everyone” knows to be true, are always possible, and that no-one else can do one’s judging for one.

Personally I’ve found that liberating. Certainly I’ve never felt that I myself was ever bullied or conned into an opinion that I didn’t *really* want to hold.

But of course if I were to come across Winters dismissing “The Song of Wandering Aengus” out of hand and calling “The Moods” the best poem in Yeats’ *The Wind among the Reeds*, I would have to do some more thinking about the matter.

XVIII

Personally I find critics like Leavis and Winters less dominative and authoritarian than I do the ostensibly permissive Fish.

By reducing the academic-critical life to self-advancement within prestige systems whose tacit rules the quick-minded figure out to their advantage, Fish seems to me to impoverish academic discourse. It dwindles to rhetoric in the service of power.

And it makes *challenging* power harder. The more powerful are licensed (a) not to attend seriously to the arguments of the less powerful about specific poems, novels, plays, etc and (b) not to work intensively at firming up their own arguments with respect to those texts.

XIX

Moreover, it removes those texts themselves as voices in the dialogue.

The plays of Shakespeare have been of inestimable value to individuals across four centuries who have questioned the nature of authority in their own societies.

But in a postulated world of discourse in which the only *real* (which is to say power-charged and change-effecting) texts are those of the currently arguing academics, the discourse of Shakespeare as itself an arguing is written out of the loop.

XX

The privileging here of secondary over primary texts is of course a reversal of the older and basically Romantic view of things in which “creative” writers, especially “geniuses”, were assumed to be (like Wordsworth in that sonnet) conduits through which The Truth benignly flowed.

But trading one falsification for another seems to me, as I may have said before, like saying, “We used to believe that the moon was made of cheese. Now we know it’s made of styrofoam.”

Which bring me back to discourse and evaluation.

XXI

Whether we find it easy or not, evaluation is inescapably a part of literary studies and related activities.

Whether one is editing a magazine or anthology, or being a judge in a poetry competition, or compiling a syllabus for a class, or putting together a Ph.D. reading list, or deciding what texts to teach in a class, or praising poets or poems to friends, one is willy-nilly engaged in deciding that for certain purposes some things are better than others.

And unless one simply wants to be a carbon copy, one can’t just say that this or that work *has* to be on a list because it has always been there. It probably *hasn’t* always been there. What we refer to as canons

(there is no such thing as *the* canon), have always been in process of change.

The point is that unless someone is willing to take a risk and say that, in her/his considered opinion such-and-such a poem/poem is not as good as has generally been thought, and that another is a good deal better than has been thought, principled change would not be possible.

XXII

But of course evaluation is not something defined and orderly, like fumigation or pruning. It is a *variety* of activities.

At times, the members of some prize-giving committee may indeed be looking for *roughly* the same kinds of things when reading submissions—the degree of originality, the displayed command of whatever set of conventions the writer has chosen to adopt (the tacit “rules” of the chosen game, as it were).

But in practice, in discourse inside the academy, people rarely, if ever, say to each other, “All right, now let’s evaluate the poem. Get out your check lists.”

And it occurs to me that the way in which most people normally turn immediately to some particular when asked to support a large gesture of praise or dispraise is methodologically sound.

XXIII

To defend a conversational claim that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare’s masterpiece by saying “I mean, it is the play that best epitomizes the Renaissance perception of the inseparability of love and death in human sexual relationships” would (even if one were capable of such a move) invite a discussion that zoomed at cosmic speed away from the play itself into ever more rarified abstractions, including, no doubt, the concept of Tragedy and the nature of Western sexuality.

Whereas enthusing about the graveyard scene, which happens to be the one most vividly present to one at the time, can invite further anchorings in specific scenes and works, either because one’s interlocutor adduces some particular that he/she loves about that scene

and wants to go further into the scene, or expresses dislike or puzzlement regarding that scene.

And to demand to know at the outset, debating-fashion, whether the presence of a great scene in a work guarantees that the work itself is great would seem to me another too-swift move into abstractions.

XXIV

A good discussion, from my perspective, would be one in which both individuals felt at the end that they had learned something profitable about the work under discussion, and about other works.

And it occurs to me that were I myself to be teaching a class in seventeenth-century poetry and my students were so little acquainted with the styles and procedures of seventeenth-century verse that they assumed without question that the Fishy text belonged in that category, I would be asking myself what I had been doing wrong.

As might a medievalist whose students all assumed that an unidentified passage from *Cymbeline* was by Chaucer.

XXV

The purest and most natural “evaluative” discussions are usually those that occur when people are talking about some movie that they have seen together. If we all read lots and lots of poetry for pleasure, no doubt we might see the same kind of unanxious and non-games-playing purity there too.

I wonder what it would be like talking with Fish over coffee about a movie that you and he had recently seen.

It is possible the discussion would soon shift to being about Fish’s theories rather than about *Pulp Fiction* or (God forbid!) *The Lion King*.

On the other hand, Fish might do what you and I would do if we had strong feelings, and insist that his own view of the movie was the right one (“It’s great,” “It’s despicable,” whatever), and point to things in the movie that he had noticed and that he wanted you to recall.

In sum, he might behave as though he believed that what he had to say about the movie was not only interesting but *true*.

But perhaps Fish doesn't care for movies?

Afterthoughts

XXVI

It seems to me more and more likely (taking a tip from Mark Bruhn, as I recall) that some/most/all of those original students of Fish's understood Fish's (mis) information correctly as an As-If directive and acted accordingly, interpreting those words on the board *as if* they were a 17th century poem.

In the same fashion, I might tell graduate students in a class of mine, in straightfaced Borges-fashion, "Three paragraphs in Chapter VIII of *The Great Gatsby* were by Hemingway; identify them," or, "Jack [sitting across the room] is a Martian. At the end of this class meeting, present me with proof of this. You may not question him directly."

I would hope for, and no doubt get, some interesting displays of problem-solving.

XXVII

Fish seems to me to confuse reading in the same way with arriving at the same results.

Three doctors, trained in the same way, subscribing to the same beliefs, and using the same methods, may disagree strongly about the nature of a patient's distress and the appropriate way of dealing with it.

Orthodox Talmud scholars, I assume, have disagreed strongly with one another about a good many matters.

Chess-players abide by the same basic rules, but with very different results.

Indeed, I suspect that for there to be disagreements as distinct from divergences, there *have* to be shared assumptions.

XXVIII

If what Fish is trying to talk about with his notion of interpretive communities is identity of *results*, then his postulated communities are liable to become very small very fast where the arts are concerned.

Two or three persons (though I have doubts about the three), may indeed be or become very close to one another, and find the same things amusing, and be irritated by the same kinds of pretentiousness in art movies, and not have to *explain* to one another why they don't find Woody Allen funny.

But even then there are going to be plenty of matters about which they disagree strongly. In the long run, indeed in the short one, Fish's interpretive communities are liable to come down to communities of one. At which point one has to start over again about the nature of a community.

XXIX

It seems to me a sad commentary on the demoralized state of our profession that a swashbuckler like Fish should have gotten so far by working so small a handful of basic ploys, like the kind of would-be flesh-creeping village cynic (Gertrude Stein called Ezra Pound "a village explainer—interesting if you are a village; if not, not") who contends in the tavern against all comers, endlessly, that there is no such thing as free will, and no such thing as an unselfish action.

Texts:

(a) Fish

In a well-known passage in his *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1983) Professor Stanley Fish explains how during one of his class meetings in the State University of New York at Buffalo he had written on the blackboard the names of the authors of certain texts, presumably in an anthology, that should be read for the following meeting.

They went, he informs us, as follows:

Jacobs-Rosenbaum
Levin
Thorne
Hayes
Ohman (?)

The form in which I have presented them is the form in which he himself does, though in its centred symmetry it doesn't look to me exactly like how you would normally write such a list.

In any event, he tells us, when his next set of students (for a class in 17th-century English religious poetry) came in, he informed them straightfacedly that this was a religious poem and asked them to explicate it, which they proceeded to do with a gusto and ingenuity worthy of publication, presumably along the lines of what they had previously been doing with poems by Donne, Herbert, Traherne, and so on (particularly Herbert, who wrote some “shaped” poems himself).

Jacob's ladder, the “tree” of the Cross, the Virgin Mary, Moses, were a few of the elements that came waltzing in. “Finally, I must report that one student took to counting letters and found, to no one's surprise, that the most prominent letters in the poem were S.O.N.” I trust that the student ended the term with an A.

Since then, Professor Fish says, “I have duplicated this experiment any number of times at nine or ten universities in three countries, and the results are always the same, even when the participants know from the beginning that what they are looking at was originally an assignment.”

(b) Leavis

In his “Literary Criticism and Philosophy,” which first appeared in *Scrutiny* in 1937, Leavis was responding to a published letter from René Wellek, who had taken issue with what he saw as Leavis's indifference to philosophy in his dealings with the English Romantic poets, and outlined what he saw as Leavis's own critical norms.

Among other things (in the photocopied excerpt that I gave the seminar group), he said,

The critic—the reader of poetry—is indeed concerned with evaluation, but to figure him as measuring with a norm which he

brings up to the object and applies from the outside is to misrepresent the process. The critic's aim is, first, to realize as sensitively and completely as possible this or that which claims his attention; and a certain valuing is implicit in the realizing. As he matures in experience of the new thing he asks, explicitly and implicitly: 'Where does this come? How does it stand in relation to...? How relatively important does it seem? And the organization into which it settles as a constituent in becoming 'placed' is an organization of similarly 'placed' things, things that have found their bearings with regard to one another, and not a theoretical system or a system determined by abstract considerations....

What, on testing and re-testing and wider experience [he asks himself], 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?

The essay is in Leavis's *The Common Pursuit* (1952)

(c) Winters

Wordsworth's sonnet "Mutability," as quoted by Winters on page 169 in his book *Forms of Discovery* (1967), goes as follows:

From low to high doth dissolution climb,
And sink from high to low, along a scale
Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;
A musical but melancholy chime,
Which they can hear who meddle not with crime,
Nor avarice, nor over anxious care.
Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear
The longest date do melt like frosty rime,
That in the morning whiten'd hill and plain
And is no more; drop like 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.

“Let us examine the poem point by point,” he says, and proceeds to do so in a long paragraph that I gave to the group, and from which I shall quote a few passages.

Dissolution [he points out] does not climb and sink; it is going on everywhere at every moment. Dissolution does not resemble a musical scale; this comparison gives us no aid in hearing, seeing, understanding, or imagining either dissolution or a musical scale. Only the most violent of dissolution is audible; the dissolution proceeding as I write, in my body and in the books on my shelves, is inaudible and bears no resemblance to music.

He asks,

What is “over-anxious” care? Does he mean that all care is “over-anxious” and that we should, in the proper romantic fashion, refrain from bothering our heads about anything? Or does he mean that there are degrees of anxiety and somewhere a proper degree?

Of the statement “Truth fails not,” he enquires,

Does he mean that the truth is always there or that we always know about it? The second meaning would be foolish, the first hardly worth stating in so empty a fashion—some things can be taken for granted.

To which he adds,

His meaning, I imagine, is about the same as that in the best line in XXXIV (*After-Thought*) of the sonnets to the river Duddon: “The Form remains, the Function never dies.” The universal survives, the particulars vanish... But the sentence “Truth fails not” is so general as to be both undefinitive and pompous.

He concludes by saying:

The last two and a half lines are the best in Wordsworth and are among the few great lines to be discussed in this essay. 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. This one perception was the occasion for the poem; the poem has nothing else to offer.

Going Tertiary (2010)

Dear Helen,

I wonder how you've been getting along with Archambeau's *Laureates and Heretics*. I've just reached the end of the Pinsky chapter, but am less than enthusiastic so far.

[Robert Archambeau's *Laureates and Heretics; Six Careers in American Poetry*, 2010, discusses Yvor Winters and five of his former students, Robert Pinsky, Robert Hass, James McMichael, John Mathias, and John Peck.]

I am less impressed than I might once have been by being told about all the brilliant discussions of poetics that Archambeau has looked at. Some kinds of plenitude seem signs of decadence rather than vitality. The texts that he speaks of, rather like his own maybe, sound like performances in a field that has been sufficiently tilled and tidied for workers in it not to have to engage in depth now with individual poems and poetic languages, and their various knotty and problematic identities.

Moving abstractions around with a show of philosophical objectivity really isn't all that hard. But once there's a return to what might be called the organic complexities of actual poems, the abstractions are liable to implode or become merely "period." As happened to a lot of academic philosophical discourse after Nietzsche erupted with all that brilliant psychological observing of the processes of thinking.

Archambeau's identification of Winters' post-experimental poetics and poetry as "Augustan" is an inheritance, I assume, from Donald Davie, whose *Collected Poems*, even with Clive Wilmer urging me on, contained nothing with sufficient emotional substance to it for me to want to add it to *A New Book of Verse*.

Archambeau's own use of the term is extraordinary, anyway, since he writes as if Winters had never talked about the Renaissance plain style, or nineteenth-century French poetry, or (Winters' own term) the post-symbolist method, or the crucial matter of form as an articulation and intensification of energies, or the aural. The work of poets like Corbière, Valéry, and Bowers goes effectively or actually

unmentioned, as does that major article “The Significance of *The Bridge* by Hart Crane.”

I wonder how widely Archambeau has read among actual poems, and how good his own French is. But perhaps this kind of thing is what happens when you arrive at a tertiary level of theory from which it is hard, even should you want to, to keep moving back down to a variety of specific poems.

You will probably not agree, but I think, with Archambeau’s kind of aridity in mind, that *A New Book of Verse* has remained Wintersian and classical (not neo-classical) in a variety of ways, even when I’ve included poems and poets that wouldn’t or didn’t make it onto his map of the acceptable, and which he would probably have dismissed with scorn. I’m reading poems as speech-acts, not as windows opening into “minds” and deriving their meaning from what is known, or believed to be known, about them biographically and about, abstractly, their “thought.”

Not that aspects of mind aren’t there in poems, at times with a high specific density (W’s term, or was it “gravity”?).

And even when I’m reading works from broadsides, my ears are cocked for metrical and stanzaic progressions that are expressive and related to meaning. Recently, too, I figured out, given my own fondness for some of the poems of Praed, like “The Last Quadrille,” that in fact there was Classical Romanticism as well as Romantic Romanticism, the former being observable in the work of poets, like Praed and the Byron of *Don Juan*, who were acquainted with the classicism, so different from that of Virgil and Horace, of Martial, Propertius, Catullus, and of course Ovid.

I’m not speaking of imitations but of the kind of alertness to human actualities that T.E. Hulme was pointing to in “Romanticism and Classicism.” Of course I’m pushing the envelope at times. But there are lots of poems and poets that *haven’t* made the cut into *A New Book*.

Actually, not that I’ve been consciously operating in that fashion, the dominant paradigm for me might be that of Cunningham’s collected poems, with their accommodation of high-cultural reachings (what I’ve called heroic order), and strippers doing propeller twirls, and all the rest of it in between, without one mode delegitimizing or ironically

subverting another. Like Cunningham, I myself enjoy various manifestations of the trivial and the vulgar (in the sense of popular), as well as the exalted.

The Pinsky chapter became a heavy trip for me after Archambeau got into the cultural matrix out of which Pinsky's poetry supposedly emerges. I don't know Pinsky's more ambitious works, and what Archambeau has to report about modernism, traditionalism, post-modernism, identify-poetics, etc., isn't necessarily all wrong. But I can't see sufficient profit in trying to work out at what points it fits with my own general sense of things as derived principally from those two great cultural commentators FRL (plus *Scrutiny*) and YW, with assists for me from a few other minds.

I can imagine your finding the brave new world of Theory a far cry from the value-charged and character-rich world of your work on the Civil War, not to speak of your own poetic practices, and more tiring than energizing. Something at any rate seems seriously missing in how Archambeau talks about Pinsky. It all comes across as ideas ideas ideas. But when I look at some of those verse quotations, they seem so flat, metrically and linguistically. And when Archambeau points admiringly to all the kudos and appointments that make Pinsky, in contrast to YW, a Winner, the name of Alfred LORD Tennyson edges into my mind.

There is some dissing in the Pinsky chapter of the idea of a universal human nature. I find that simplistic. In such anthropological studies as I have read, there are intelligible and familiar motives at work in the communities, however diverse the structures may be. And I recall with particular pleasure a TV documentary I saw a few years ago about one of those tribes, in South America or maybe Borneo, which had only recently been discovered by "civilization."

Perfectly comfortable in front of the recording camera, a member of the community, maybe in his thirties, was talking with the interviewer, and you simply knew, from his alert gaze, his responsive facial expressions, his whole body English, and what he was saying, and how he said it, that this was a very intelligent man in "our" terms, and that, transported into "civilization", he would not be at a loss talking with other very intelligent men. I say men, but I recall similar women in other contexts.

I've also been taking comfort from two lovely TV series that I may have mentioned to you, one called *Orangutan Island*, the other *Escape to Chimp Eden*. Talk about basic primate needs and behaviours, ours included! Here you can see, particularly among the orphaned orangutans, the need for mutual communings and caring, as well as the explorings of selfhood and the jockeyings for food-related prestige. I hope someone somewhere is doing a really good book on all this. There was a fascinating one a few years ago called *Chimpanzee Politics*.

I take it that assaults on the idea of a common humanity have been mostly driven by the felt oppressiveness of too-narrow definitions of the natural and the normal, particularly when deities or the quasi-deity Nature are invoked. The counter-insistence that nothing is simply “given” and that you can make everything over on your own terms to satisfy your own desires obviously goes back, in French intellectual life, to the powerful philosophizings of Sade.

I like hearing all those voices across the centuries in *A New Book*—recognizable human voices, not just period-specific ones. Another gift from YW.

Who I'm sure, if he'd been able to see reproductions of the extraordinary drawings of hunting lionesses and other creatures in the Chauvet Cave, as alive and accurate as if done today (or better), would have instantly recognized that there were highly intelligent and, in his sense of the term, rational human beings thirty thousand years ago.

Yours,

John.

Northrop Frye and Evaluation (1967)

I

‘Service!’

‘But this court’s *square!*’

‘Are you here to play tennis or do surveying? Service!’

One of the main reasons for the heatedness of the Leavis–Snow controversy, I take it, was this kind of deadlock. The anti-Leavisians plainly felt that Sir Charles may have had his faults but that he was a distinguished intellectual and that any correcting of his errors should have been done in the spirit of a debate between fellow professionals engaged in the common pursuit of truth. Dr. Leavis, on the other hand, was no less plainly acting on the conviction that Sir Charles as a would-be sage was preposterous, that the deference being accorded him was even more preposterous, and that to go through the motions of arguing *with* him would be to concede precisely the assumptions that needed bringing into general question.

This kind of feeling does not usually make for urbanity, not least because of the sense of bafflement often entailed in it, but to seek to deny it utterance¹ seems to me a denial of the ultimate seriousness of the intellectual life; we are not all members of the same club merely because we earn our livings in similar ways or commit our reflections to print, and there are higher goods than decorum. A good many of us, I presume, feel in much the same way about Northrop Frye as a literary theorist as Leavis did about Snow as a cultural one; and I think we should be making ourselves heard more.

Speaking for myself, I recall somewhat wryly my reactions in the late Fifties when I inspected the then little-known *Anatomy of Criticism* in connection with an article on poetic theory. Energy, obviously; a wide-ranging mind, certainly; some interesting observations, true; an interesting *bouillabaisse* of muddles as well; and of course it was fascinating to watch someone coming forward so confidently to set the whole world straight about literature and literary criticism at last. But so far as its main thrust and pretensions were concerned, the book seemed to me essentially an elaborate apologia for a conventional academic taste by someone who was incapable of responding

passionately to individual works yet craved to talk about literature on the grandest possible scale, and who had been revising the rules of the game to permit himself to escape from genuine critical confrontations. And accordingly I judged it unlikely to be of any particular consequence.

I could hardly have been more wrong in my guess, of course. Frye's reputation, as we all know, has gone up and up and *up*, so that even literary journalists now refer to the *Anatomy*, quite casually, as a critical classic. Well, it still seems reasonable to assume that time will do its job and that Frye's theorizings will be joining those of other would-be panoptic systematizers—Herbert Spencer? Fourier?—in the historical junkyard. Yet some systems not only catch on but stay caught on, and some do more harm than others. And though the continuing vitality of Christian Science needn't fill us with any animus towards the intellectual inadequacies of Mrs Eddy, Frye's inadequacies seem to me a matter for serious concern.

II

A noteworthy episode in the history of Frye's spreading influence occurred in 1964 when three or four American admirers of his joined forces with Frye at Trinity College, Connecticut, to address a conference of teachers sponsored by the Connecticut State Department of Education. Not only was the scent of victory clearly in the air. "Criticism", for instance, "whether we like it or not, is moving into the spectrum of the sciences—and the sentimental outcries we have all heard are partial proof that this is so."²... (Thus Mr Paul Smith, in what seems a rather curious non sequitur.) But under the sponsorship of a former editor the addresses were then published en bloc in *College English* (the principal organ of the National Council of Teachers of English, with a circulation of over 10,000) and thereby brought approvingly to the attention of a lot of academics who had probably hitherto known of Frye only by reputation.

Since what interests me is the quality of Frye's intellection once we slow down our reading and start probing in depth, I propose to fasten in the rest of this article on "Criticism, Visible and Invisible," Frye's very jaunty and ambitious lead-article contribution to the affair.³ The article is informed by the same kind of energy as the *Anatomy* (it is a

number of cuts above those broadcast Talks to the Kiddies that got into print as *The Educated Imagination*), and it is very useful to have most of Frye's basic principles spelled out in a relatively small compass, since the defence can't be offered that if we will only read on trustingly enough a seemingly hopeless muddle on page three will miraculously get converted into cogency by what happens two hundred pages further on. Furthermore, by looking at this particular article with care we can account with unusual ease for the cordiality with which Frye's messages have been received by so many people. There is a good deal in the article that calls out for comment, as a matter of fact,⁴ for its pretensions are so thoroughly matched by its confusions that it really is a sort of classic in its way.

It is with Frye's dealings with the question of evaluation that I shall concern myself here, however, since the Don't Rock the Boat campaign against criticism with any emotional depth to it is getting considerably too strong these days. I have tried to make my discussion self-contained, though I assume that the interested reader will wish to check my account against the article itself if the latter hasn't come his way already.

III

Pieced together, Frye's basic position on evaluation in "Criticism, Visible and Invisible" is as follows. Literary works are "not so much things to be studied as powers to be possessed"; and they not only *can* be possessed, they *should* be possessed. Since a critic's task is the "*subjection*" of himself (Frye's italics) to "the uniqueness of the work" being read, "every writer must be examined on his own terms," no writer can be judged by "standards derived from another ... however much 'greater'", and "the attempt to establish grades and hierarchies in literature itself" is "really an 'aesthetic' form of censorship." In teaching, hardly surprisingly, the most desirable situation is when the teacher can "skip preliminary stages and clear everything out of the way except understanding," since the goal is to ensure that works "become possessed by and identified with" the student.

None of this is exactly news in twentieth-century criticism, and I shall be returning to that point. At the moment I wish to place the reading of literature in a very different context from that in which, seemingly, it

exists for Frye, and I shall begin by appropriating for my own purposes Frye's contention that "works of literature are not so much things to be studied as powers to be possessed."

Frye, it is true, does virtually nothing to illuminate what he means by that assertion, apart from introducing the analogy of learning to drive a car and attaining to a state of "unmediated unity" with it; yet it happens that the analogy is a felicitous one for my purposes.

Normally when we are learning to drive, the mediating agent at the outset is discourse, and our relationship to that discourse can remind us of certain facts about our relationship to most of the discourse we encounter. Our pedagogically minded friend says that pressing a certain button will start the engine, and we believe him and press it; he warns that there is a sharp corner coming up, and we believe him and slow down. Here, as elsewhere, our picture of reality and our stance towards it are being constantly modified, mostly in small ways, sometimes in quite large ones, by what we hear or read. Metal protuberances turn into headlight-dimmers and cigarette lighters, blank areas ahead are converted by highway signs into intersections and narrow bridges, and as our friend reminisces about the previous evening the North End of the city suddenly becomes blessed with an excellent Chinese restaurant that we hadn't known of.

We live, in other words, in a world of other people discoursing, and we are engaged constantly and inescapably in assessing that discourse with a view to deciding what to do with it and how much of it to take over. If we knew from past experience that our friend's taste in food was terrible, the North End wouldn't suddenly possess a restaurant that we might later go out of our way to visit; and if, apropos of driving, he were to tell us cheerily that it was perfectly safe to overtake on blind curves we would probably discriminate against him on that point too, with the aid of the advice of other friends or of the driver's manual, or perhaps even of common sense, which is rather more common where driving than where talking about books is concerned.

What I am leading up to is obvious. Initially we do not confront "literature" and "non-literature," we confront pieces of discourse; and they all invite us implicitly to take them over whole, just as other people's modes of discourse offer themselves implicitly as norms to which we should consider approximating ourselves.

IV

Now, what I have described in summarizing Frye's general position is a singularly thoroughgoing attempt to place our dealings with literature outside any normal human context. There is to be (seemingly) no comparing, no discriminating, no organizing, no self-defending use of creative intelligence in the face of even the largest claims on us for surrender.

By what principles, then, it seems reasonable to start by enquiring, is Frye's posited reader-critic-teacher to proceed when he seeks to determine which particular utterances he is to give the magical name of "literature" to in the first place (this love poem but not that memo to a secretary, this historical novel but not that historical study, this entry in a journal but not that passage in a political speech), and on what rational grounds is he to determine which of the works within the charmed circle are to merit more, and which less, of his and other people's attention?

We do, after all, exist in time (a fact that Frye, I rather suspect, prefers to ignore as far as possible), and our time is limited, and life is by and large a matter of choices—choosing between restaurants when we want an evening out; choosing between this book and that when we haven't time to read both on a trip; choosing between this syllabus and that when we are paid to present literature to our fellow citizens and have the power to alter their lives by giving them low marks in examinations. Personally I have read almost all the agreeable Australian detective novels of Arthur Upfield, and there is certainly nothing quite like them, but I doubt that we shall ever see a course in them made compulsory for graduate students at Toronto.

Well, Frye does have an answer of sorts to the problem of discriminating among works inside the circle, and if the clues to how we go about drawing the circle in the first place that he offers his New England teachers seem very largely negative ones (we presumably hunt around for utterances about which we can confidently make the kinds of preclusive assertions that I have quoted), the answer logically carries over into that problem too.⁵ It is breathtaking in its confusions and fascinating in its implications, and I propose to consider both rather carefully. What we go by, it would appear, are "the traditional valuations," and any attempt to "redistribute" them is unnecessary,

futile, and probably due to the critic's desire to display himself "to better advantage."

V

Certain points are almost too easy to be worth making, so I shall get them out of the way quickly. When we speak of the "traditional valuations" of Donne and Marvell, for instance, are we talking about seventeenth-century ones, or mid-Victorian ones, or the twentieth-century ones with which we are all familiar, and when consensuses conflict with each other, by what principle other than that of accordance with our own preferences do we decide which ones to honour with the epithet "traditional"? What, for instance, is the "traditional" valuation of Cowper? Again, when Mr Frye tells us approvingly how

old-fashioned books on English literature which touch on "lesser" poets such as Skelton and Wyatt in the early sixteenth century [and] maintain an attitude towards them of slightly injured condescension ... had to be superseded by a democratizing of literary experience, not merely to do justice to underrated poets, but to revise the whole attitude to literature in which a poet could be judged by standards derived from another poet, however much "greater."

it is impossible to see how, in Frye's own terms, this was not in fact one of those very "revaluations" of "traditional assessments" that Frye deplores—especially since the relationship between the general change that Frye describes and the critical activities of Eliot, Pound, and others is a matter of common knowledge.

Furthermore, since Frye is so keen on the "contexts" in which literary phenomena occur, it seems pertinent to recall at this point that the critics involved in the "democratizing" were for the most part not simply deciding magnanimously to admire *more* poets than had been admired by the authors of late-Victorian histories of literature. The great poet, *the* great poet, in whose shadow the kinds of reputations Frye appears to have in mind were stunted was John Milton, and it was very largely the devaluing of Milton (and, relatedly, of certain aspects of the romantics and the Great Victorians) that made possible the elevation of the others.

If Frye wishes to contend that the more poems that are “liked” by everyone the better, that is his privilege, but he cannot reasonably expect applause when he takes self-aggrandizing advantage of certain arduous revaluations yet sneers at the labours of the revaluers and argues that there was “no genuinely critical reason” for such revaluations in the first place.

VI

But these, as I indicated, are not matters that need lingering over here. What is more to the point is how Frye uses his notion of “traditional valuations” to shut out evaluative criticism. The following passage is a key one:

There are two contexts in which a work of literature is potential, an internal context and an external one. Internally, the writer has a potential theme and tries to actualize it in what he writes. Externally, the literary work, actualized in itself, becomes a potential experience for student, critic, or reader. A “bad” poem or novel is one in which, so the critic feels, a potential literary experience has not been actualized. Such a judgement implies a consensus: the critic speaks for all critics, even if he happens to be wrong. But an actualized work of literature may still fail to become an actualized experience for its reader. The judgment here implies withdrawal from a consensus: however many critics may like this, I don’t.

The first type of judgement belongs primarily to the critical reaction to contemporary literature, reviewing and the like, where a variety of new authors are struggling to establish their authority. The second type belongs primarily to the tactics of critical pressure groups that attempt to redistribute the traditional valuations of the writers, usually including themselves, to better advantage. There is no genuinely critical reason for “reevaluation.”

It is hard to comment patiently on such a passage, I am afraid; many of us, I assume, would not accept its like from our students.

It is absurd, for instance, to speak as Frye does here in the fourth sentence of what *the* critic feels: a critic who judges a work to be bad may be doing so for any of a number of reasons, the reason that Frye

gives being only one of them. It is nonsense to say that a critical judgement implies a consensus and that the critic making it “speaks for all critics.” True, most of us like to imagine that the assertions we make would be assented to by all intelligent readers if they were to consider matters carefully enough. Only a megalomaniac, however, is going to delude himself that this assent will actually come, and only a critic who never reads any other critics will be under the impression that he is their spokesman.

These are minor faults, however, in comparison with the sleight-of-hand that then occurs, namely the shuffle by which the test of whether or not a work is successful, and of whether or not a critic is responding to it adequately, becomes a numerical one.

VII

Where no consensus yet exists, a critic is apparently going about his legitimate business when he decides whether or not there is an “actualized” literary experience in the work. As soon as some sort of favourable consensus has arisen, however, the presupposition for Frye is that if a critic *now* judges that the work is bad he is simply being imperceptive, and probably conceited to boot. Even in Frye’s own terms, which I shall adopt for the moment, this is nonsense. If fifty people on the lookout for actualized literary experiences review a brand-new novel in the same week and most of them conclude that there is such an experience in it, no doubt that will be very gratifying to the author and the publishers, but it is in itself no guarantee that the experience is actualized, and in no way alters the fundamental relationship of a reviewer the following week to the work in question.

True, a possibility is now open to him that wasn’t open to the others; he can become a historian of literary opinion and record the findings of his precursors. True, again, if he happens to respect the minds of some of those precursors he may suspect in advance that quite probably something is actualized in the work. But as to whether it is in fact or not, well, just as each of those precursors was engaged in determining whether it was actualized for *himself*, so too must he be, assuming that he wants to engage himself with the work at all. And so on *ad infinitum*.

There is no logical point at which what Frye rather condescendingly calls “reviewing and the like” ceases and a new set of rules comes into operation. The hundredth critic of a work is not the hundredth identical test-tube in a controlled experiment. An account of a hundred critic’s opinions is not a laboratory report, it is simply an account of a hundred pieces of writing by readers who undoubtedly vary widely in intelligence; and the authority of each critic (as judged for purposes of the kind of rough guidance I mentioned above) is generally something that we can only determine by checking the critic’s reactions to other works against our own—which brings us back again, of course, to the individual self confronting the individual work.

Yet Frye is apparently perfectly confident that he can tell when the collective authentication has occurred and the traditional and unquestionable valuation been arrived at. If science had proceeded in such a fashion, Frye’s physician would still be studying Frye’s horoscope.

VIII

But perhaps, as someone once remarked naughtily about Wagner, Frye isn’t really as bad as he sounds. Let me probe a little more carefully, therefore, for what is intended in Frye’s notion of “traditional valuations.” The following statement is the most helpful for this purpose: “Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Middleton Murry, F.R. Leavis, are only a few of the eminent critics who have abused Milton. Milton’s greatness as a poet is unaffected by this; as far as the central fact of his importance in literature is concerned, these eminent critics might as well have said nothing at all.”

Were Frye to have made the same kind of assertions about, let us say, Robert Louis Stevenson or George Meredith, its oddness and the strategy in it would have been more blatant. But then we all know that unlike the Stevenson and Meredith mills the Milton ones are still chuffing away at top pressure in the academies.

And hence when Frye characteristically slithers from the fine bold phrase “greatness as a poet” (which presumably means the greatness of Milton’s poetry as we appropriate it now when reading it) to the phrase “the central fact of his importance in literature,” we may not immediately feel moved to protest.

After all, no critic in his right mind has ever denied the immensity of Milton's influence on English poetry and literary thought. Indeed, it was precisely because of the continuing strength of that influence that Frye's "eminent critics" were moved to write what they did about him. On the other hand, even Frye would hardly deny that for a number of decades that influence has been negligible in the writing of significant poetry and that a major cause of this has been the activities of the critics whom he so casually dismisses. And accordingly it can hardly be escaped that what Mr Frye really has in mind is that the majority of academics (including the very powerful editors of scholarly journals and the Milton specialists who read submitted MSS on Milton for them) have either been unpersuaded by the accounts of Milton given by those critics or else, if temporarily impressed during their salad days, have now repented.

These facts, however, leave unconsidered the reactions of the by now fairly considerable number of readers who have accepted various findings of those critics and now see Milton as an author of great distinction but with grave flaws that they would probably not have noticed otherwise. In the sense that I have outlined it here, it still makes sense to talk loosely of the traditional (or conservative) view of Milton as opposed to the non-traditional one. But once we approach valuations in this way it becomes apparent that that is what we are involved with—valuations, conflicting valuations, and not unquestionable facts.

It is Frye's right to prefer one valuation—or, more exactly, one constellation of accounts—to another. But he can hardly expect us to allow the accidents of the history of academic opinion by themselves to determine what we are going to read and appropriate now, and in what spirit.

IX

Furthermore, there are some rather sinister implications in Frye's approach to tradition and evaluation that deserve spelling out.

The first involves the question of truth. Fastening upon an unnamed critic who judged Fielding's *Jonathan Wild* a failure "because no character in it represented a moral norm," Frye objects to "the critical procedure involved in the 'X is a failure because' formula," and

declares roundly that “no critical principle can possibly follow the ‘because’ which is of any importance at all compared to the fact of *Jonathan Wild’s* position in the history of satire and in eighteenth-century English culture.”

To begin with, Frye’s implied reduction of value-judgements (with the aid of a couple more examples) to a simple “X is Y because Z” is either naive or disingenuous, though as is so often the case with Frye it is hard to decide which. Evaluative commentaries of any worth tend to take the form of “X is A and B and C and D,” and if the string of assertions is made convincingly the summatory assertion “X is really pretty feeble stuff” or “X is a masterpiece” can be as superfluous as that no doubt apocryphal mid-Victorian comment at the close of a performance of *Antony and Cleopatra*, “How different from the home life of our own dear Queen!”

But even with a succinct statement taken out of context, the question of its truth or falsity would seem from any reasonable point of view to be paramount. Yvor Winters, for example, has called Henry James “the greatest master in our literature of the most limited kind of narrative matter combined with the most unsound narrative technique antedating Joyce, Miss Richardson, and Mrs Woolf”.⁶ Readers who revere James will presumably say this is rubbish, and if they happen to dislike Winters in general they will no doubt add that this sort of thing is typical of him. Readers who have admired some of Winters’ writings but are unfamiliar with the quoted remark may feel that its context is worth looking into, even if they at present greatly admire James too. In either case the first question is whether or not James’s work is as Winters claims.

Furthermore, if we were to conclude after re-examining that work that Winters was right, our attitude towards James’s influence on twentieth-century fiction and criticism would alter too, just as our attitude towards the Nazis in their beer-hall days is modified by our knowledge that they succeeded in gaining power.

X

For Frye, however, all judgements involving “because” that include the ethical appear to be dismissible as merely symptoms of “anxieties.” And when we further consider that he seems to be under

the impression that statements of one kind can somehow get cancelled out by statements of another kind (“The garbage stinks.” “Nonsense! That can has been in this family for years!”), it is tempting to infer that Mr Frye, for all his show of philosophical sophistication, is an unreconstructed old-style rationalist who believes that most of the assertions made in normal critical discourse are merely “subjective” and hence of little or no consequence. And so to some extent he is, I think, but to stop there would be to let him off too lightly.

The fact is that Frye on occasion shows himself perfectly willing to subscribe to normal evaluative utterances on the basis of their truth. For example, when Ezra Pound, “in the middle of his *Guide to Kulchur*, expresses some disinterested admiration for the lyrical elegies of Thomas Hardy,” we learn that “the effect, in that book is as though a garrulous drunk had suddenly sobered up, focused his eyes, and begun to talk sense,”⁷ and it seems reasonable to suppose that Mr Frye would not have spoken of sense and sobriety had the author praised been, by some extraordinary quirk of Pound’s mind, Wilhelmina Stitch.

This example, it is true, follows immediately after the arresting assertion that “evaluat[ive] criticism is mainly effective as criticism only when its valuations are favourable,” an assertion that arouses a lingering suspicion that Frye’s vulgarity in the matter of numbers may be accompanied by a Chamber-of-Commerce vulgarity of the ‘Boost, Don’t Knock’ variety. The simpler conclusion, however, is that Frye has his own literary pantheon quite clear in his mind and that the only critical assertions that can engage his interest, or at least win a patronizing nod, are those that accord with it. And this brings me to a related and more disturbing aspect of Frye’s general position.

XI

It seems to me hardly escapable that Mr Frye’s show of speaking out boldly on behalf of intellectual liberty is a sham of a rather nasty kind, and probably this lies near the centre of my present quarrel with him. “The belief that good and bad can be determined as inherent qualities is the belief that inspires censorship,” he informs us, “and the attempt to establish grades and hierarchies in literature itself, to distinguish

what is canonical from what is apocryphal, is really an aesthetic form of censorship.”

Well, there are forms of censorship that are a good deal more objectionable than the kind that Frye detects here, even if we grant that he is using the term correctly, which in fact we shouldn't. If someone asks you for the names of three or four of the best thriller writers and you say Hammett, Household, Hamilton, you're no more playing censor than you are if you tell him where he can get the best Chinese food in town.

Frye himself, as I have intimated, is plainly of the opinion that some works are in some meaningful sense “better” than others. He can refer casually to “the major writers of literature,” he appears to feel that Shakespeare, Milton, Joyce, James, and Eliot are among them, and he even (I think) judges that Henry James is superior to Mickey Spillane (though since he is also of the opinion, seven lines later, that “the difference between good and bad is not something inherent in literary works themselves, but the difference between two ways of using literary experiences,” it is hard to see any rational basis for the judgement—or for the assertion that “it is a writer's merits that make the criticism on him rewarding, as a rule.”

Indeed, Frye, when he doesn't stop to think about being Frye, is as well aware of the literary situation as the rest of us. It is when he *does* stop that the trouble starts, for he thereby gets into an obvious enough quandary, and the only way out of it for him is the not uncommon one of intimating (with the aid of his appeal to “tradition”) that the hierarchies that he establishes for himself are not “his” hierarchies at all, they are somehow objectively and unarguably out there, so that when anyone disagrees with him it is they who are being merely subjective and eccentric.

It seems to me that most of the thrust of his article is towards suppressing such disagreements.

XII

Having remarked that “criticism, to be useful both to literature and to the public, needs to contain some sense of the progressive or the systematic, some feeling that irrevocable forward steps in

understanding are being taken,” Frye observes amusedly that “we notice that all the contributors to *The Pooh Perplex* claim to be supplying the one essential thing needed to provide this sense of progress, though of course none of them does”; and the tenor of the article makes clear that more is intended by that “of course” than simply that the imagined representative critics in Frederick C. Crews’ vulgar little book are dull-witted.

Early in the article, Frye announces with seeming modesty that he is unaware of using any particular critical method himself or of having invented a particular school of criticism (though if he really believes the latter claim he must be the only person in English in Canada who does). Frye’s modesty seems to me duplicitous, however. The dominant tone of the article is that of someone who believes that he himself can provide the requisite “sense of progress”; and since for Mr Frye there are in fact “no different ‘schools’ of criticism today, attached to different and irreconcilable metaphysical assumptions,” it appears that critics who disagree with Frye are not simply doing different things from Frye, they are, by the very act of presuming to be critics, committed to doing the same thing as Frye but are too stupid to realize it and so are doing it less well.

It is Frye, we gather, who is triumphantly sane and central and anxiety-free. Other critics, especially those who engage in evaluation, are all too likely to be guilty of “critical arrogance,” or “critical dandyism,” or “pedantry,” or to be critically “undemocratic,” or to be preoccupied with their own “social position” and have “a particular hankering to be a gentleman,” or to be imprisoned in “historical variables,” or to be indulging in “critical narcissism” and depriving criticism of its “content,” or, in general, to be in one way or another lost in a “shadow-battle of anxieties.”

XIII

In other words, just as Frye tries to escape from personal judgements by appealing indirectly to statistics to objectify them, so too he attempts to escape the discomforts of propounding a highly idiosyncratic (if eclectically arrived at) critical position by insisting obliquely that he is miraculously not standing in any “position” at all,

he is simply and objectively and au-dessus de la mêlée looking at the Truth about literature and criticism.

All critics and theorists, of course, like to believe that what they say is true. To my knowledge, however, only Frye has sought to prove that all critical activities that conflict with his own must *a priori* be so wrong as not to be worth paying serious attention to by anybody.

Well, to want to put beyond a pale all the people you disagree with is understandable enough, though one recalls what sort of things generally happen when this is done at the socio-political level. It is understandable, too, that a certain kind of teacher should yearn to be able to enter the classroom armed with his certified “established classics” and “clear everything out of the way except understanding” and “submission.”

Understandable or not, however, Frye’s attitude, for all his genuflections towards democracy when it suits his purposes, seems to me fundamentally and unpleasantly authoritarian, and to deserve being seen as what it is; ‘ “No sovereignty;—” “Yet he would be King on’t.” ’ Even C. S. Lewis, with whom Frye shares certain fallacies,⁸ didn’t pretend to that; they were his opinions that he was advancing, and he was advancing them against other individuals who might, in his estimation, be horribly wrong but whose assertions on that account deserved taking all the more seriously. In this he had a far sounder and saner grasp than Frye of the nature of critical discourse—and so, I suggest have all the evaluative critics whom Frye so cursorily dismisses.

XIV

When I spoke earlier of the relative lack of novelty in certain of Frye’s assertions, I had in mind, of course, that we were entering the territory already posted by other theorists with such catchphrases as “non-referentiality,” “a rapt intransitive attention,” “the autonomy of the work of art,” and so on. It seems to me, however, worth insisting as firmly as possible that the automatic assumption that a work of literature is essentially different from other pieces of discourse has been going around far too long, that it has never been adequately demonstrated, and that the burden of proof, especially when someone

makes use of it as casually as Frye does, is still wholly on its proponents.

One gets very weary (at least if one happens to agree with I. A. Richards that “poetry is the completest mode of utterance”)⁹ of having the utterances of Shakespeare and Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Melville and the Eliot of *Four Quartets* hustled away into a species of linguistic harem; and one grows weary, too, of attempts to convert criticism into the attendant eunuch.

I will record furthermore my impression that Isobel C. Hungerland has demonstrated beyond reasonable question in her *Poetic Discourse* that “all the modes of meaning, features, and functions of everyday language are found in poetry”¹⁰; and if, taking comfort perhaps from the writings of such professional philosophers as R. G. Collingwood, Hungerland, and Philip Wheelwright, we happen to regard the arts in general as the area where human existence in all its bewildering complexity gets the most fully confronted, then I submit that the fuller our own response to literature—fuller in the sense that as much of our personality as possible is engaged in depth—the better.

And it is precisely through the greatest writers that our perceptions and valuations get the most fully clarified and our demands correspondingly sharpened. When we are very young we may find it hard to imagine anything more enthralling about a desert island than *The Swiss Family Robinson*. By the time we have grown intellectually and emotionally, with the assistance of further reading, to the point where we can appropriate *The Tempest* reasonably fully, we have become different persons, and during the act of appropriating it we are changing further. And our reactions to *The Swiss Family Robinson*, should we happen to return to it subsequently, will inevitably differ from our childhood ones.

Frye, as I have indicated, is scornful of the conception of literature as “a hierarchy of comparative greatness, the summit of which provide[s] the standards for the critics.” But in a sense we don’t arrange literature hierarchically at all, it arranges itself, just like most other things in life. Yeats presumably had something like this in mind when he wrote, “All good criticism is hieratic, delighting in setting things above one another ... and not merely side by side. But it is our instinct and not our intellect that chooses.”¹¹) And to seek to arrest the process and

exist in a succession of mentally unrelated encounters with works of literature, even assuming that such an existence were possible, would be to impoverish the psyche and diminish the chances of growth, especially the growth that comes with conscious and purposeful discrimination.

These facts, and most of the other facts that I have been putting forward, seem to me implicit in the writings of virtually all distinguished critics, even though those critics would not necessarily have described their activities in such terms.

They have not, that is to say, been approaching literature like judges in a Miss Universe contest concerned with awarding so many points for deportment, so many for physique, so many for skills, and so on, and then totting things up, striking averages, presenting prizes, and going home with a pleasurable sense of time well spent. On the contrary they have been passionate men very deeply involved in existence, who have been responding vigorously and sensitively to the modes of utterance and being of other men, and constantly discriminating between various aspects of them. And in their commitment, their courage, and their indomitable independence they can assist the growth of such qualities in those of us who will attend to them. Unlike Frye they minister to self-responsible freedom and maturity.

XV

I said near the outset that we can get a clearer idea from Frye's article of why he should be as popular as he is. His own major conclusion and message seems to me to be the following:

The central activity of criticism, which is the understanding of literature, is essentially one of establishing a context for the works of literature being studied. This means relating them to other things; to their context in the writer's life, in the writer's time, in the history of literature, and above all in the total structure of literature itself, or what I shall call the order of words.

And to this there can scarcely be a "traditional" academic who wouldn't say Amen, even though he might be a trifle foggy about that "order of words."

It isn't really so paradoxical that Frye, the ostensibly advanced critic, should have been able to speak so comfortably out of the centre of what for a good while was one of the most stultifyingly traditionalist English schools on the North American continent. And it must undoubtedly be very pleasant for a great many of his readers (or receivers of his reputations) to be reassured that the only respectable function of the literary commentator is to provide "contexts" for traditionally approved works. Isn't that, after all, what they themselves have been doing all along? Now they can stop worrying. To borrow from Mr Dooley: "Northrup Frye—I use him f'r purposes iv define ... I have niver read him," I says; "he shtands between me an' all evalyative crrit'cism," says I; "I've built him up into a kind of break-wather," says I, "an' I set behind it, caf'm an' contint, while Arnold an' Winthers an' Eliot an' Layvis an' Jawnson rages without," says I.

12

For that matter, should one plume oneself on one's adequacy to the Time of Camp, it can be no less gratifying to feel liberated, Caliban-like, from all oppressive notions of natural hierarchies, of sharply varying degrees of intelligence and sensitivity and critical insight, of the rareness of the possibility of being brilliant and the much greater likelihood of being wrong or dull—in sum, from most of the pain and risk of intellectual and emotional selfhood. Some ways of escaping from "anxieties," however, seem remarkably close to being intellectual lobotomies.

XVI

Well, I suppose that in the end each of us chooses the critical stance that accords with his stance towards existence generally. I can only say that in one way or another an evaluative "noticing of things in the literary work of particular relevance to one's own experience," *pace* Frye, should in my personal but also, I suspect, traditional opinion belong at the very centre of reading and criticism. I do not see how we can profitably notice things of particular relevance to other people's experience, and if we are looking for things that aren't relevant to experience at all, then the grounds on which we wish to promote the official teaching of literature would appear extraordinarily shaky. "Insight criticism," as Frye contemptuously calls it, will no doubt be

“random” if done by ill-organized minds, but some minds are at once both richly open to experience and very finely organized.

Frye seems to me in general to be singularly short on a capacity for opening himself to possibly disturbing encounters with other minds. Though he has borrowed various formulae from other critics (indeed, I suspect that one reason for his ineffable self-assurance may be that for a long time he was the only person at Toronto apart from McLuhan who was reading the newer criticism, and so couldn't be called to account in his dealings with it), he gives no signs of ever having attended closely to their arguments and procedures.

And there is no sign, either, that he has ever felt that great literature is a matter not of a “total structure” but of human utterances, utterances by other individual human beings who may well be his superiors in various ways.

Instead there is only the overweening satisfaction with being Northrop Frye and the kind of “tolerant aplomb” that comes about, as he himself half intimates, by resisting the pressure of works of art to stimulate us “into a response of heightened awareness.” The self-satisfaction appears a long way from being justified.

XVII

In the face of the pretensions of Frye and the enthusiasm of his science-minded admirers at Trinity College, Connecticut, and elsewhere, it is tempting to end by simply quoting T.S. Eliot's observations that “there is no method except to be very intelligent”¹³ and letting it go at that. But a little more seems called for in amplification.

In one way, of course, to speak of science in connection with literature and criticism is to reveal a radical incomprehension of all three. Great and good literature is not a world, it is investigations of a world—our world—and while we can meaningfully speak of the philosophy of science it would be meaningless to call for a science of philosophy.¹⁴ Furthermore, to insist that criticism must “contain some sense of the progressive or the systematic, some feeling that irrevocable forward steps in understanding are being taken,” is fatuous if unaccompanied by a recognition that literature is almost as varied as life itself and that

intelligent and passionate people progress and organize and understand in a variety of ways.

However, it is becoming increasingly plain that critical discourse is liable to *deteriorate* in a variety of ways unless in certain respects there is a shift towards the empiricism that is so admirable an element in the sciences—a determined effort to cease bombinating, in Frye’s fashion, about a magical entity called literature, and instead to examine introspectively and scrupulously how language actually functions in our own mental economies and what happens as we move existentially along the road of discourse that leads, without interruption, from a casual ‘Good morning!’ to *Moby Dick*.

In saying this I am not imagining that any mode of investigation will present us with marvelous discoveries that invalidate the explorations of good critics, any more than the revelations of twentieth-century psychology have diminished the stature of good art.¹⁵ Nor am I suggesting that most of us should start doing this sort of thing formally.

My point is, rather, that good criticism has always involved the existential self-awareness that prevents the talking of certain kinds of nonsense; that we live in a time, however, when various assumptions about the nature of the mind and “reality” make it easier to talk critical nonsense; and that any investigators of consciousness who can help to reverse the trend will deserve very well of all of us.¹⁶

Reviewing a study by one of the greatest of Frye’s despised evaluative critics, a social psychologist was able to observe:

It is the distinction of this book that it consistently treats poetry as one of the major products of normal human activity, and the making of poetry as being at least as responsible an occupation as, say, scientific research. In fact the quality of the book may be indicated by saying that an intelligent scientist ... could read it without getting exasperated.¹⁷

The same could not be said of “Criticism, Visible and Invisible”; and in this, as in other respects, it is representative of Frye’s contribution to literary studies.¹⁸

Notes

1. As in, for instance, the curiously schoolmarmish pronouncement of Mr Lionel Trilling that “There can be no two opinions about the tone in which Dr Leavis deals with Sir Charles. It is a bad tone, an impermissible tone” (“The Leavis-Snow Controversy,” *Beyond Culture* (N.Y., Viking, 1965) p. 150).
2. Paul Smith, “Criticism and the Curriculum; Part 1,” *College English*, XXVI (October 1964), p. 29.
3. Northrop Frye, “Criticism, Visible and Invisible,” *College English*, XXVI (October 1964), pp. 3–12
4. E.g., the assertion that “Knowledge about things [in contrast to knowledge *of* things] preserves the split between subject and object *which is the first fact in ordinary consciousness*. ‘I learn ‘that’; what I learn is an objective body of facts set over against me and essentially unrelated to me” (italics mine); or the irony of its being Mr Frye who asserts that “all methods of criticism and teaching are bad if they encourage the persistent separation of student and literary work: all methods are good if they try to overcome it”; or the implications of the seemingly favourable assertion that “It was natural for an eighteenth- century poet to think of poetic images as reflecting ‘general ideas of excellence’; it is natural for a twentieth- century critic to think of them as reflecting the same images in other poems”; or the *Through the Looking Glass* effect of Mr Frye’s remarking apropos of Leavis that “an insistence on the ‘thereness’ or separation of critic and literary work forces one [i.e., a critic like Leavis], for all one’s concern, to go on playing the same ‘aesthetic’ game”—and later contending, immediately after a defence of his own critical practice, that “the end of criticism and teaching... is not an aesthetic but an ethical and participating end”; or the casual impudence—three decades after *Culture and Environment*—of Mr Frye’s suggesting as it if it were an interesting new idea that schoolteachers ought to be doing something to equip their pupils against “the assaults of advertising and propaganda.”
5. I must emphasize that I am concerned at this point not with what Mr Frye himself takes literature to be but with the conduct he

seems to be desiderating of anyone deciding to study and comment on it. And in this regard there are not two problems of selection but one, if we take Mr Frye's prescriptions at their face value. There is no essential difference between circling a number of pieces of discourse and saying, "These are literature," and describing further circles inside the main one to indicate degrees of increasing importance. Both operations entail comparisons and contrasts, discrimination, and the implicit assertion, "If you want to have such and such an experience, you should study this and not that."

6. Yvor Winters, *The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises* (Denver, Alan Swallow, 1957), p. 37.
7. In point of fact, Pound says nothing whatever in that work about 'the lyrical elegies' of Hardy. He simply talks, in very general terms, about Hardy's "poetry" and "poems."
8. S. L. Goldberg's masterly "C. S. Lewis and the Study of English." *Melbourne Critical Review*, v (1962), pp. 119–27, can be recommended at this point.
9. I. A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1934), p. 163; italics mine.
10. Isobel C. Hungerland, *Poetic Discourse* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1958), p. 43.
11. W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (N. Y., Macmillan, 1961), p. 289.
12. The original passage by Finley Peter Dunne is quoted by Jacques Barzun in *Teacher in America*, chapter 11.
13. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London, Methuen, 1920), p. 11.
14. One agreeable way of getting Mr Frye's ambitions into perspective is to reflect on what the reactions would have been if Mr Frye, following his theological bent perhaps, had gone into a different discipline and favoured the intellectual world with an *Anatomy of Philosophy*.

15. It is surely high time that somebody pointed out how almost Wittgensteinian a sophistication Leavis in particular has always exhibited about what are and are not valid and profitable moves to make in the handling of language and “ideas.”
16. Gilbert Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind*, for instance, seems to me a far better aid to intelligent talk about literature than most works of literary theory.
17. D. W. Harding reviewing *New Bearings in English Poetry in Scrutiny*, I (1932), p. 87.

Afternote

Three other articles of mine are related to this one, namely “Evaluation and English Studies,” *College English*, XXXV (1973), “Stretches and Languages: a Contribution to Critical Theory,” *College English*, XXXII (1971), pp. 381–98, and “Modern Poetics: Twentieth-Century American and British,” in Alex Preminger and others, eds., *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton University Press, 1965), the latter of which I wrote in 1957 in my second year as a Ph.D. student at the University of Minnesota.

The English Department was a good place to be in those days. It was, I suppose, what might be described as a hotbed of the New Criticism: Allen Tate, Leonard Unger, William Van O’Connor, and Murray Krieger were there (though I never took classes from them), and Robert Penn Warren had been there in the 1940s. But it did not *feel* like a hotbed. There was an atmosphere of critical openness, thanks in part to the continuing presence of Joseph Warren Beach; and doing a minor in a distinguished Philosophy Department helped some of us become clearer as to our reservations about the Brooks-and-Warren-and-Wimsatt sort of thing, as well as increasing our scepticism about the philosophical gesturings and wisdom-mongerings of persons in English who had done no philosophy. Among the results was the quarterly journal the *Graduate Student of English* [GSE, which a few of us founded and edited from 1957 to 1960 and which was livelier, brighter, and more ambitious than its title (we intended it half-humorously in contrast to ones like *Howl*) may suggest.

V

Music, Words, and the Construction of Meaning

(2013)

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 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 staff, 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?

VI

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 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.

Vision and Analogy (2003)

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 experiences.

During most of the 1920s, Winters himself had been deeply Romantic, hungry to seize, and clutch, and penetrate the essence of things. And in this he was like American writers like Melville and his contemporary and, for awhile, friend, Hart Crane, both 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, 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 (*mutates 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 William 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 (apart from nicotine), and accessible on www.jottings.ca, 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 the 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, in *A Bit of This and a Bit of That about Poetry*.

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 “Referentiality and Stanley Fish.” 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 metonymys 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 thirty or forty 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* (in *Words and Idiom*, 1925) 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 *dig into* our *viewpoints* and see if we can *fuse* them,” and you’re trying to sense something coherently physical and can’t (a *literal* “viewpoint,” as on a hill-top, 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 eye—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

Mallarme'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 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 marvelous poem "Larme." ("Drop"), which Claire McAllister glosses in her translation as meaning also a drop to drink.

Loin des oiseaux, des troupeaux, des villageoises,
Je buvais, accroupi dans quelques 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 sables vierges.
Le vent, du ciel, jetait des glaçons aux mares...
Or! Tel qu'un pecheur 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*" ("Mute elms, grass without flowers, an 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 noirs, des lacs, des perches,
Des colonnades sous 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 bués.

Le ciel est de cuivre
Sans lueur aucune.
On croirait voir vivre
Et mourir la lune.

Corneille pousive
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 into concreteness 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 fiction.

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 difference, 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 absent from Anglo 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 compleat 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 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 as Kafka had pointed out in 1909 about an airplane-rally, steadiness can sometimes seem too easy. Hendry 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 *actions* 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), 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 Beiderbecke, Orson Welles), 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 Holiday), 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 18th-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 that 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 honeycomb-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....

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 20th-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 genies, 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.

Some obscurity of expression doesn't hurt, though. If you're too lucid, the reader may feel that it couldn't have been all that hard to write, and that he could have thought of it himself.

Winters, Leavis, and Language

(2003)

I

As William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, said about its brassy 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 language.

De Man, equally obviously, was operating within the framework of a naive 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”!) 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 the Death of 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 [Winters continues] 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 and curved lines 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.)

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, 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, 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, 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.)]

(10) 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.]

(11) 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;

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 their 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 that:

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's 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 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 a 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 great critic, whose essential subject, it seems to me, was language—its Kierkegaardian “appropriations,” 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, 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 mind of Michael Tanner—philosopher, music reviewer, Wagner freak.

But it did fit the odious H.A. Mason in his role as *Scrutiny's* hatchet-man. (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 disastrous 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, incorrigibly 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.

VI

Descartes' Discourse on Method **A Look at Its Rhetoric (1959)**

Over and above such intrinsic merits as it may still have, this article is a historical curiosity. I wrote it in Minneapolis in 1959 without benefit of any of the subsequent Continental luminaries, and it anticipates some of the things that would be said and done later. Which is to say, we were not all reading by candlelight in those days before Theory crossed the Atlantic to illuminate everything.

There was in fact a good deal of theory around by then (much of it pretty awful of course), and if as a reader of F.R. Leavis and other Scrutiny writers, I was able to write as I did here, it was because of that reading, not despite it, even though this is not what people think of as Leavisian writing.

Leavis's extraordinary linguistic and theoretical sophistication has still, so far as I know, not had its due. It is still not a commonplace that Paul de Man, to judge from the internal evidence, almost certainly derived his post-New York Review of Books technique of the pounce, the intent unraveling of a single representative passage or phrase, from what Leavis had ("scandalously") done in pieces like his polemical exchange with F.W. Bateson in Scrutiny in 1953.

I wrote this article specifically for the journal with the unpromising (but ironically intended) title that I was co-editing at Minnesota—GSE, The Graduate Student of English. I have occasionally regretted that it didn't appear elsewhere and been more widely read (I think it could have been), but we were desperately short of contributors, and in fact it went in over a pseudonym in order to flesh out our roster.

I have gone through it breaking up paragraphs, adding Roman numerals, combing out some "rather's," "very's," "significant's," and other marks of the nervous beginning writer, and in general doing what a good copy-editor would do anyway. But I have in no way altered my argument, either in general or in detail. What you see here is what I saw and said then, forty years ago, before the deluge.

I

Among the seminal works of philosophy there are a number (Plato's dialogues being the most obvious example) that especially demand and repay the attentions of literary critics. Their rhetoric is potent, and by attending to it carefully one can isolate certain extra-philosophical assumptions and attitudes that have not only been very influential in the past but are often still influential today.

Descartes' *Discourse on the Method of rightly directing one's Reason and of seeking Truth in the Sciences* (1637) is such a work. It is comprehensible by the intelligent layman, for whom, in large part, it was originally intended. It is urbane, ironical, self-aware, brilliant. It has always been the most widely read of Descartes' works. And in it one can discern the elements of at least three of the most important (and more or less mutually exclusive) attitudes that intellectuals have subsequently adopted towards themselves, their functions, and their environments.

II

Its rhetoric, as I said, is potent; and in this article I shall sketch how that rhetoric can seduce the unwary reader (layman or philosopher) into reassembling those elements according to his or her own predispositions.

I will be chiefly concerned, that is to say, with identifying inadequate readings that other people can make of the *Discourse*, rather than with the nobler task of offering a reading of my own that would take into account as much of the work and of its genesis as possible. But wrong readings of a work are often more influential than right ones. And sometimes too, perhaps, identifying them can serve as a prelude to a fuller understanding of it.

III

To begin with, the *Discourse* is a remarkable specimen of that ever-attractive genre, the success story—remarkable both because the successes are predominantly intellectual ones and because they are so complete. It is the autobiographical account of a man who consistently

made intellectual decisions of great weight and daring; who acted upon them; and who (by his own account, at any rate) was invariably justified by events.

Let me indicate some of the features of his career up to the age of forty-one (i.e., the time of the publication of the *Discourse*).

IV

Becoming profoundly dissatisfied, as a young student at “one of the most celebrated schools in Europe,” with the traditional academic disciplines, he had employed the rest of his youth, in his own characteristic words,

in travel, in frequenting courts and armies, in mixing with people of various dispositions and ranks, in collecting a variety of experiences, in proving myself in the circumstances where fortune placed me, and in reflecting always on things as they came up, in a way that might enable me to derive some profit from them

It appeared to me that I could find much more truth in such reasonings as every man makes about the affairs that concern himself, and whose issue will very soon make him suffer if he has made a mistake, than in the reasonings of a man of letters in his study, about speculations that produce no effect and have no importance about them, the more remote they are from common sense, since he will have had to use the greater amount of ingenuity and skill in order to make them plausible.

And I always had an extreme desire to learn to distinguish truth from falsehood in order to have clear insight into my actions and proceed in this life with assurance. ¹

Then, after several years of intellectually emancipating peregrinations, “there came a day when I resolved to make my studies within myself, and use all my powers of mind to choose the paths I must follow.”

V

On that day, “shut up alone in a stove-heated room” in Germany, where he was billeted, he engaged in such intense introspection and

reflection that he succeeded in formulating not only the renowned “Method” (or principles) by means of which he was thenceforward to regulate his philosophical enquiries, but also the moral principles by which to organize his life in general.

And after nine more years of travel (years, too, of methodically analytical contemplation and of private mathematical investigations), he settled down in Holland to the thoroughgoing application of his Method to a formidably wide variety of major philosophical problems.

So well did his investigations proceed that by the time he came to publish some of his findings eight years later in three lengthy *Essais* (*La Dioptrique*, *Les Météores*, and *La Géométrie*) he was able to announce superbly in a key passage in the *Discourse*—which served as a preface to them—that he considered the Method

a means to a gradual increase of my knowledge that will raise it little by little to the highest point allowed by the mediocrity of my mind and the brief duration of my life.

For I have already reaped such fruits that although in my judgments of myself I try to lean towards diffidence rather than presumption; and although; when I regard with a philosophic eye the various activities and pursuits of men at large, there is hardly one but seems to me vain and useless; nevertheless I do not fail to feel extreme satisfaction at the progress I think I have already made in the search for truth; and I conceive such hope for the future that I venture to believe that, if there is any one among purely human occupations that has solid worth or importance, it is the one I have chosen.

VI

These are impressive claims, and it is an impressive history, offering a dramatic image of the life of the mind, and containing never a hint, in its cool, elegant prose, of any hesitations or regrets.

And more than any other work I know of (more even than in that similarly artful book with which in a number of ways it has the most in common, Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*), the rhetoric powerfully encourages the tendency to identify oneself with very successful

people and to assimilate the attitudes that appear to have made their success possible.

Two of Descartes' rhetorical strategies are especially seductive here.

VII

The first is this.

Although what he has, by his own account, accomplished in his forty-one years is very extraordinary, the aspect of himself that he stresses the most explicitly, especially in the first section of the *Discourse*, is his relative *ordinariness*, his intellectual kinship with his reader.

Not only is he, it emerges, an experienced, urbane, commonsensical man-of-the-world, rather than a fanciful academic. (The paragraph in which he enumerates and ostensibly commends the disciplines that he studied in his youth is a gem of delicately ambiguous subversion). He also, with disarming humility, confesses that

for myself, I have never presumed to think my mind in any way more perfect than ordinary men's; indeed, I have often wished that I had thoughts as quick, or an imagination as clear and distinct, or a memory as ample and as readily available, as some other people.

And he modestly disavows any pedagogical intent, since "Those who set themselves to give precepts must regard themselves as more skilful than those to whom they give them...."

VIII

More reassuringly still, in the famous opening sentence of the book he asserts, on *philosophical* grounds his reader's intellectual equality not only with himself but with other thinkers:

Good sense is the most fairly distributed thing in the world; for everyone thinks himself so well supplied with it, that even those who are hardest to satisfy in every other way do not usually desire more of it than they already have. *In this matter it is not likely that everybody is mistaken* [italics mine]; it rather goes to show that the power of judging well and distinguishing truth from falsehood,

which is what we properly mean by good sense or reason, is naturally equal in all men....

Admittedly an alert reader might feel that there was a certain ironical sleight-of-hand here in the manipulation of the term “good sense,” and a convenient ambiguity in the italicized assertion, just as he might look twice at the phrasing of this modest *gentilhomme*’s subsequent protestation of his own intellectual ordinariness.

But most people are not averse from having their sense of their own worth enhanced, especially when it is done in prose so seemingly candid and confiding and person-to-person.

IX

That in the creation of this “ordinary” persona the autobiographical approach (which Descartes had so brilliantly appropriated from Montaigne) plays an important part is obvious enough.

In the second—and, I am inclined to believe, the more important—of the two strategies that I alluded to above, its part is crucial.

By restricting his narrative to his own experiences, and refraining from making any unfavourable evaluations of them, and largely eschewing (especially where controversial philosophical notions are involved) unequivocal indications, particularly in the form of universal propositions, that such-and-such is what he believes *now*, Descartes soothingly avoids obliging the reader to come straightway to judgment on what is being presented to him.

In so doing he makes good *formally* his avowal near the beginning of the first section that “My design is not to teach here the method everybody ought to follow in order to direct his reason rightly, but only to show how I have tried to direct my own.”

The intellectual snob-appeal of such an approach is pretty strong.

If the reader should feel like assimilating any of the ideas or attitudes in the book, it would obviously not be because he had been beaten down in argument by an intellectual superstar. It would simply be because, as a man of common sense, he had perceived an obvious

moral or two in a tale in which an ordinary man (curiously like himself, in fact) had succeeded by perfectly intelligible means in doing uncommonly well for himself.

X

And as a further consequence of Descartes' general avoidance of coming explicitly to judgment, it is possible for the reader, thus incited, to extract from the *Discourse* one of at least three different sets of attitudes, three mutually exclusive images of the good life of the mind.

In the rest of these pages I shall sketch what those attitudes seem to me to be.

XI

The most impressive of the three is the one which seems the closest to Descartes' own; and it is very different from that of the *persona* that I spoke of earlier. For when one looks more closely at the self-revealed character of the narrator,² what one discovers is a man of startling independence of mind.

For one thing, he has succeeded in taking no idea upon trust, and instead has built up his entire system of ideas for himself, starting from first principles that he himself has established.

And so conscious is he of his own unique vision of reality that there is no-one else, living or dead, from whom he feels he can learn anything of importance to add to it.

Nor can he conceive of there being a nobler occupation than the pursuit of truth *in his own fashion*, so that he himself is justified in subordinating all else to it.

And surrounded by intellectual dullards and plagiarists as he feels himself to be, he believes (the allusion to himself is obvious) that

If there were in the world a man assuredly known to be able to make discoveries of the greatest possible importance and public utility, and whom on this account other men were trying in every

way to help achieve his aims,... all they could do for him would be to contribute to the necessary costs of experiments, and, further, to ensure against his having his leisure taken away by anybody's importunities.

In other words, we have here for the first time, and in a pure form, a compelling image of that figure whose intellectual glamour has only recently commenced to fade: the aloof, dedicated, "indispensable" scientific scholar (often too, alas, so intolerably arrogant and jealous) in whatever discipline.

XII

Yet, paradoxically, one can see too how it was that far lesser men than Descartes could have assimilated from the *Discourse*—and without a nagging sense of falsification—an image of the intellectual life that is the antitheses of this life of intensely individual, intensely daring, and (in certain respects, at least) intensely honest mental strenuousness.

Read vigilantly, the book emphatically does *not* minister to self-complacency, of course.

In it Descartes raises, indirectly but forcefully, such great central questions as "What is it that I *really* know and believe? And how and why have I come to do so?" and stresses magnificently, in passages like the following, the importance of thoroughly *earning* one's knowledge and beliefs:

For my own part, I am convinced that, if from my youth up I had been taught all the truths I have since sought to demonstrate, and had had no difficulty about learning them, I should perhaps never have known any more, or at least should never have got the practice and the skill I think I have in steadily finding new truths as I set myself to look for them.

Reading these and kindred "existential" passages, one can feel the appropriateness of there having been an anthology from Descartes' works edited and introduced by J.-P. Sartre (*Descartes*, Paris, Les Classique de la Liberté, 1946).

Nevertheless, looking elsewhere in the *Discourse*, one discerns, too, that in at least two major respects the narrator is only very imperfectly committed, existentially, to life.

XIII

For one thing, in order to be able to pursue his investigations in that “tranquility which I prize above everything,” he refuses on principle to engage himself strenuously with any ethical, social, and religious (as distinct from metaphysical) issues.

And, for another, it is noteworthy how almost totally absent from his account of slow, cautious, steady long-range plannings is any sense of the always potential imminence of his own death and of the concomitant challenge, at every instant, of “How fully and rightly, as a human being, am I in fact living *now*?”

The *Discourse*, in other words (and the very equanimity of the tone is influential here) can powerfully help to lessen one’s sense of one’s own transitoriness and of the obligation to choose and act with as full a participation of one’s being as possible.

XIV

There are further ways, too, in which, despite Descartes’ justifiable sneer at people “who fancy they understand in a day all that somebody else has thought about for twenty years,” the book can serve to erode the concept of individual endeavour, individual greatness, and to encourage the wrong kind of self-denying faith in group labours.

A reader predisposed to take Descartes’ protestations of ordinariness at their face value would also be likely to welcome the suggestion that

It is not enough to have a sound mind; the main thing is to apply it well. The greatest souls are capable of the greatest vices, as well as the greatest virtues; and those who walk only very slowly may make much more progress, if they always follow the straight road, than those who run and go astray from it.

Such a reader would derive considerable satisfaction from the deftness with which Descartes deflates the concept of “heroic” greatness (by

the strategy, among other things, of impugning the veracity of historians).

And, over against the suspect figure of the brilliant-but-unsound—and conveniently unnamed—“greatest souls,” the reader could take pleasure in the image of the more *successful* (because more practical, more systematic) plain man who has prudently resolved

To conquer myself rather than fortune; to change my desires rather than the order of the world; and in general to form the habit of thinking that only our thoughts are completely within our own power; so that, after we have done our best, everything in the field of external things that we do not succeed in getting is an absolute impossibility so far as we are concerned.

XV

He could also, this reader, fasten sympathetically upon Descartes’ statement (in the course of a somewhat convoluted account of his reasonings while trying to decide whether or not to publish “what small discoveries I had made”) that at one point he had envisioned a happy state of affairs in which

The best minds would be led to contribute to further progress, each one according to his bent and ability, in the necessary experiments, and would communicate to the public whatever they learned, so that one man might begin where another left off; and thus, in the combined lifetimes and labours of many, much more progress would be made by all together than any one could make by himself.

XVI

Thus I suggest that the second main pattern of intellectual conduct that the *Discourse* not only could but did powerfully encourage (witness Thomas Sprat on the Royal Society) was that of all the so often contemptibly small-minded believers in “method” and “teamwork” who have been with us ever since—and not just in the sciences either.

XVII

And finally, and even more paradoxically, while *Discourse on Method* is one of the first great examples of the much-touted French rationality and *clarté*, and while, according to Descartes himself, moderation and temperance are the necessary outcome of these, at the same time the book is capable of serving no less as the nourisher of the most violent kinds of political action and, ultimately, of the *moral* violence of a figure like D.A.F. de Sade.

XVIII

To be sure, Descartes himself was successful, by his own account, in effecting a striking, and socially respectable, disjunction between his philosophical radicalism and his attitude towards State and Church.

Impeccably conservative, for instance, is his declaration that “It is quite certain that the constitution of the true religion, whose ordinances were made by God alone, must be incomparably better ordered than any others.”

So, too, are his defence of the social status quo (whose faults he considers, “are almost always more tolerable than any change would be”) and his assertion that “I could in no way approve of those turbulent and restless characters who, although not summoned by birth or fortune to the control of public affairs, are yet constantly effecting some new reform—in their own heads.

So, likewise, is his elaboration of the thesis that “the mere resolution to get rid of all opinions one has so far admitted to belief is in itself not an example for everyone to follow; the world is mostly made up of two types of mind to which it is wholly unsuitable.”

Yet logically, there is no point at which either his own or his reader’s rejection of received values need halt. And in certain respects the *Discourse* can powerfully reinforce a predisposition to carry such a rejection about as far as it can go.

XIX

The actual, as distinct from the simulated, narrator of the book is a formidably arrogant figure in a number of respects.

And implicit in his story is a distinction between, on the one hand, the *Urbemensch* who, like the narrator himself, is willing to accept the responsibility of creating consciously his own reality; and, on the other, the commonalty who simply take over unreflectingly the various realities (Descartes comes close to relativism in his discussion of differing social systems and *mores*) that are handed to them by the communities into which they are born.

Descartes himself may be content, as he announces, to conform to the customs of the society in which he lives. But it is clear that the sole reason why he does so is that it is *convenient*.

XX

In the following key passage (apropos of the moral principles that he laid down for himself at the time when he was formulating his Method) he is explicit about how total is the liberty that in reality he claims for himself.

I placed in the class of extremes [to be avoided] all promises by which one renounces some of one's freedom.

Not that I disapprove of the laws allowing people to make vows or contracts that oblige them to be faithful to some good end (or even, for the securing of commerce, to some indifferent end), as a remedy against *the inconstancy of weak characters* [italics mine].

Observing, however, that there was nothing in the world that remained always in the same condition, and that *my own special aim was to perfect my judgments more and more, not to let them deteriorate* [my italics again], I should have thought I was grossly sinning against good sense if, on account of approving of something at the moment, I were to bind myself to regard it as good later on, when it might have ceased to be so, or when I might have ceased to regard it as such.

XXI

Most readers, it seems likely, would be pleased to think that they too were engaged in the steady perfecting of their judgments.

I suggest that those of them who particularly disliked the thought of being classed among the “weak characters” would find their disposition towards self-assertion encouraged still further by the following even more remarkable passage in which Descartes attempts to bridge the gap that he himself has created between intellection and the total psychical life of a man:

My second [moral] maxim was to be as firm and resolute in action as I could, and to follow out my most doubtful opinions, when once I had settled upon them, no less steadily than if they had been thoroughly assured.... [It] often happens in life that action brooks no delay; and it is a sure truth that, when we cannot discern the most correct opinion, we must follow the most probable.

And even if we can observe no more likelihood in one than another, we must settle upon some opinion, and consider it afterwards in practice not as doubtful but as perfectly true and certain; for our ground for settling upon it really is of this sort.

This maxim could henceforth set me free from all the regrets and remorse that usually trouble the consciousness of those weak and stumbling characters who let themselves set out on some course of action as a good one and then in their inconstancy decide afterwards that it is bad.

Emphases mine.

XXII

So much for moral violence. As for *political* violence, the structure of the promptings towards this seems to me neater still.

First, as I have pointed out, we have the nurturing in the reader of the gratifying sense that he himself can be the equal, and quite likely the superior, of those unsystematical “greatest souls,” the heroic political

and military leaders of the past—and, by implication, of the present too.

Next, we have Descartes' pervasive emphasis on the greater efficiency of a *systematical* man who is planning from scratch, not merely in philosophical and scientific but also in social and political transactions.

I am thinking particularly of the passage in which, with characteristic neo-classical arrogance, he asserts the superiority of the city that is planned by *one* man to one that has grown up gradually, and the superiority, likewise, of a system of government planned by *one* man to those of “peoples that were once half-savage and grew civilized only by degrees, and therefore made their laws only in so far as they were forced to by the inconvenience of crimes and despots....”

And, finally, we have the kind of unwitting but nonetheless effective encouraging of extremism that I drew attention to in the preceding section.

XXIII

In other words, the *Discourse* insidiously sanctions the type of person who considers that he too belongs to Descartes' intellectual elite (“free from all the regrets and remorse that usually trouble the conscience of ... weak and stumbling characters”); who prides himself on being intellectually entitled to power; and who is confident that all social changes that he can succeed in bringing about will inevitably be for the better, since they will be the products of “reason” and “method.”

Thus it is not fanciful to be conscious of the presence, as on an undeveloped negative, of some of the grimmer lineaments of the French Revolution, and of all subsequent revolutions patterned on it, in this urbane and astonishing little book of philosophical autobiography.

XXIV

To ravel out all the complexities and extra-philosophical significances of the *Discourse* would, I imagine, require a study a good many times the length of the present one.

Among other things that might figure in it would be: a detailed analysis of Descartes' indebtedness to Montaigne; a thoroughgoing investigation of his own influence both on contemporaries and near-contemporaries, and on such later figures as Rousseau and Sade; a clarification of how many of the attitudes and ideals in the *Discourse* are in fact inconsistent with each other, and of the causes of such inconsistencies; and a consideration of how far the manifest inadequacies of Descartes' conception of the good life—his attitudes towards history and art are relevant here—were responsible for the inadequacies in his technical philosophical findings.

Yet, sketchy as the present discussion has been, it may at least have recalled one important fact where the studying and teaching of “literature” are concerned—namely that, in a very real sense, one has simply not “read” a good many non-literary works unless one has approached them with due literary-critical vigilance.

If the current “literary”/“non-literary” paper-curtain can continue to be broken down, it might transpire that literary men do, after all, have a few things of consequence to teach their confreres in other disciplines—and not only about literature but also about the latter's own specialties.

Perhaps, too, by inhibiting some of the more noxious kinds of unconscious assimilation of extra-philosophical, or extra-psychological, or extra-sociological attitudes, they might succeed eventually in rendering their own existence, as individuals in a spiritually corrupting society, a little more endurable.

Notes:

1. The translation that I have used is by E. Anscombe and P.T. Geach, and is the best that I have come across. It is to be found in their *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, London, Nelson, 1954. However, certain minor elisions occur in it. The reader who desires the complete text might do best to consult N.K. Smith's *Descartes' Philosophical Writings*, New York, Modern Library, 1958. The standard Haldane and Ross translation is not merely unnecessarily free; in a number of places it is just dead wrong.

2. I put things thus because, although for the sake of convenience I have been using Descartes' name most of the time, it would be a mistake to equate the narrator with Descartes. To get at the latter, as manifested in this work, one would have to take into consideration such matters as: the shock to him of Galileo's condemnation by the Inquisition in 1633; his desire to "sell" his own system to the Jesuits; his glossing over of the strenuousness and difficulty of his intellectual labours; and the far better advantage to which he appears in that much more honest, profound, and exciting work *Meditations in First Philosophy*, of which, in a number of respects, the *Discourse* is a vulgarization.

Swift and the Decay of Letters

(1955)

I

As Ricardo Quintana has said, "It is possible to analyze Swift's controlling ideas with some accuracy, and yet to miss entirely that quality of the man which set him apart from all of his contemporaries." In discussing Swift's satirical treatment of the literary life of his own times in *A Tale of the Tub* and *The Battle of the Books* I shall not, therefore, attempt to deal with his neo-stoicism, his concept of right reason, or his religious beliefs, for it seems to me a mistake to assume that his revulsion from much of the writing that surrounded him stemmed primarily from his holding such relatively public ideas.

In any discussion of *A Tale of a Tub* as a whole, of course, they have to be invoked. But in an important sense Swift's rationalism, neo-stoicism, and Christianity were negative beliefs. That is to say, their function for him was primarily to aid in restraining and making harmless the emotions.

Underlying his treatment of literature, on the other hand, I think we can discover certain more positive and personal feelings about what qualities were admirable in individuals and in society; and it was because he possessed those feelings that he was able to earn the devotion of a man so different from him in many ways as Yeats.

With their aid he resisted a social process involving, among other things, the ascendancy of the crowd over the individual, the substitution of method for invention, the exaltation of the present over the past and the future over the present, and, at bottom, the replacing of strenuous moral endeavor by a spiritual passivity compounded of mere perception and sensation.

The essential nature of that process, I believe, was what he symbolized by the spider in *The Battle of the Books*; and what he opposed to it was what he symbolized by the bee.

I shall begin by considering briefly the nature of the two opposing concepts of the admirable human life that seem to have been

interacting in his mind when he wrote the two works that I am concerned with.

II

Though science and philosophy in seventeenth-century France and England differed in their development in much the same way as the most distinguished of their originators had differed—Bacon having emphasized the importance of experimentation, while Descartes denied it—at bottom both were alike in that, metaphysically, they tended to reduce man to the status of a ticker-tape machine, a mere receiver and recorder of impulses.

For the English apologists for the new science, no less than for Descartes, happiness, and indeed all right-thinking, was to reside ultimately in the morally neutral contemplation of the “real” world of measurable qualities. “The experimenter,” Thomas Sprat wrote in 1667 in his *History of the Royal Society of London*, “labors about the plain and undigested objects of his senses, without considering them as they are joined into common notions”; and elsewhere in the book he contrasted the uneasiness of always pondering theological, social, and historical problems with the comfort of contemplating nature, and emphasized the superiority to “the glorious pomp of words” of “the silent, effectual, and unanswerable arguments of real productions.”

Superficially active and industrious with their barometers, white powders, and dissected dogs, the members of the Royal Society were in reality, according to Sprat, engaged in obtaining the same kind of passive and hedonistic satisfaction that they might otherwise have sought under the aegis of the neo-Epicureanism of the period. “This course of study,” Sprat wrote,

will not affright us with rigid precepts or sour looks, or peevish commands, but consists of sensible pleasure, and besides will be most lasting in its satisfactions, and innocent in its remembrance.

What raptures can the most voluptuous men fancy to which these are not equal? Can they relish nothing but the pleasures of their senses? They may here enjoy them without guilt or remorse.

And when Sprat triumphantly enumerated the recent discoveries of science, it was in a very different spirit from that in which Elizabethans and Jacobeans had viewed the explorations of their own times.

It was now, as it were, the compass that counted, not the sea-discoverers who used it—and counted because, like the other discoveries, it appeared to assure the rapid approach of a time of comfort in which (Sprat again) “the beautiful bosom of Nature will be exposed to our view; we shall enter into its garden and taste of its fruits, and satisfy ourselves with its plenty; instead of idle talking and wandering under its fruitless shadows.”

It was the pseudo-philosophical web of such an outlook, I suggest, that Swift sensed stretching over much of the cultural life of his contemporaries; and there were reasons why he should have been particularly disturbed by it.

III

During his formative years as secretary to Sir William Temple, Swift had found at Moor Park a concept of right action and true human creativity that was the antithesis of the foregoing. The moderate epicureanism of his employer, like his pleasure in gardens and “old wood . . . , old wine . . . , old books . . . , and old friends,” was only the earned resting place of a man who, during his time, had lived with considerable strenuousness. In his writings, Temple’s admiration of energy was as pronounced as his love of rationality, and it was the former quite as much as the latter that Swift took over and made his own.

“Though it be easier to describe Heroic Virtue, by the effects and examples, than by causes or definitions,” Temple wrote in a well-known passage,

yet it may be said to arrive from some great and native excellency of temper or genius transcending the common race of mankind in wisdom, goodness and fortitude. These ingredients advantaged by birth, improved by education, and assisted by fortune, seem to make that noble composition, which gives such a lustre to those who have possessed it, as made them appear to common eyes,

something more than mortals, and to have been born of some mixture, between divine and human race; to have been honoured and obeyed in their lives, and after their deaths bewailed and adored.

That Temple is not speaking of mere energy of personality, of the kind that Swift himself later took exception to in his scornful references to Perseus and Hercules in *A Tale of a Tub*, is emphasized by what follows.

IV

According to Temple, Heroic Virtue, the possession of which he denies to Caesar and Alexander, so conduces to the general good that its “character . . . seems to be, in short, the deserving well of mankind.”

It is, in fact, the highest form of wisdom; and between wisdom and wit (that other great manifestation of human energy), Temple makes the connection in his essay “On Poetry.” “To the first of these are attributed, the inventions or productions of things generally esteemed the most necessary, useful, or profitable to human life, either in private possessions or public institutions. To the other, those writings or discourses which are the most pleasing or entertaining to all that read or hear them. . . .”

Here, presumably, we have the origin of Swift’s remark in “A Digression concerning Critics,” that “One man can fiddle, and another can make a small town a great city, and he that cannot do either one or the other deserves to be kicked out of the Creation.”

And such a yoking of art and practical wisdom is by no means to the disadvantage of the former, as Temple goes on to show in his account of the creative process:

But though invention be the mother of poetry, yet this child is, like all others, born naked, and must be nourished with care, clothed with exactness and elegance, educated with industry, instructed with art, improved by application, corrected with severity, and accomplished with labor and with time, before it arrives at any great perfection or growth. ‘Tis certain that no composition requires so many Ingredients, or several of more different sorts

than this, nor that to excel in any qualities, there are necessary so many gifts of Nature, and so many improvements of learning and of art.

For there must be an universal genius, of great compass as well as great elevation. There must be sprightly imagination or fancy, fertile in a thousand productions, ranging over infinite ground, piercing into every corner, and by the light of that true poetical fire, discovering a thousand little bodies or images in the world, and similitudes among them, unseen to common eyes, and which could not be discovered, without the rays of that sun.

Here in Temple's writings, it seems plain, is the basis of Swift's aesthetics and literary morality in *The Battle of the Books* and *A Tale of a Tub*.

IV

The qualities that for Temple primarily ennoble both poetry and public action are energy, invention ("the first attribute and highest operation of divine power"), wisdom, self-mastery, and wit (for Swift "the noblest and most useful gift of human nature"). And for both Swift and Temple these were to be found preeminently in that idealized classical civilization concerning which Christopher Dawson has written:

It is not easy for us to realize the strength of this classical tradition. For three hundred years men had lived a double life. The classical world was the standard of all their thought and conduct. In a sense it was more real to them than their own world, for they had been taught to know the history of Rome better than that of England or modern Rome; to judge their literature by the standard of Quintilian; and to model their thought on Cicero and Seneca.

It was, I believe, with the standards of Moor Park firmly appropriated—the standards symbolized by the bee—that Swift contemplated the very different world of contemporary English letters.

V

In his incursion into the battle of the Ancients and Moderns, Swift superficially had the worst of it. Looking back at the episode from a literary-historical viewpoint, we can only raise our eyebrows at such oddities as his attribution of insanity to William Wotton's methodology, his sustained attack upon Richard Bentley, his obtuseness about Bernard de Fontenelle, his extraordinary lists of adversaries, remarkable no less for their omissions (such as Newton and Locke) than for the placing of some of the inclusions (Thomas Rymer, for instance, who was notoriously on the side of the Ancients).

And when we recall the similar battles of the present century, it is difficult not to feel considerable sympathy for a movement, especially one with Fontenelle as its most distinguished spokesman, that was essentially an attempt to break through a kind of historical sound-barrier and endow the present with as much reality and significance as the defenders of the Ancients accorded the past.

VI

Yet, coarse and unjust as his attack in some ways was, I think that Swift was resisting a process that seemed to him to work insidiously but undeniable towards the corruption of contemporary writing.

For now the average author need no longer feel any obligation to measure himself, consciously or unconsciously, against the classical writers whose greatness had formerly been felt more or less in Temple's terms.

Instead, as Swift made explicit in *A Tale of a Tub*, his contemporaries had almost succeeded in destroying the felt power of those writers as individual personalities, either by outright denigration or by busying themselves only with forms and texts, and were now proceeding to address their own works solely to the mental world of the anti-historical present.

And the literary climate of the period was of a kind peculiarly to hinder the creation of any new and valid critical standards.

The strength of party politics was growing at such a rate that soon almost all of the rapidly multiplying professional writers would be earning their livings in the service of one or more of the many factions. The increasingly influential upper middle classes of London were relatively lacking in a cultural tradition of their own and tended to absorb from the aristocracy their less admirable qualities only. And pleasure-seeking women were playing more and more conspicuous roles in fashionable society.

Thus, when it was not mere propaganda, literature tended increasingly to be thought of as mere entertainment, an undemanding way of killing time; and whichever kind of commodity he was trying to provide, the average writer was drawn almost inevitably into gross flattery of his patrons and a pervasive concern to keep as closely abreast as possible of the rapidly and arbitrarily changing fashions.

Consequently, whenever an appeal was made to higher standards than the resulting *mêlée* of competitiveness and personally motivated criticism provided, it could be to a posterity whose critical status, logically, would have to be on a par with that of the present reading public. And in dealing with such appeals Swift was justifiable ruthless.

Conscious as he was of the body's decay, devouring time was for him as terrifying a reality as it had been for the Elizabethans and Jacobean, and his evocation of it, in the "Dedication to Prince Posterity," and of the ephemerality of most contemporary publications, is one of the most powerful things in the book.

In his own eyes, that is to say, there could be no valid escape from the obligation to live and write self-responsibly in the present by the light of respectably standards personally believed in.

VII

If we grant the fundamental soundness of his view of the ordinary reading public, Swift's at first somewhat odd yoking of the Royal Society group, the coffee-house cliques, and the pedants gains considerably in impressiveness when we consider that these, the intelligentsia of the period, not merely did not assist in the preservation or creation of valid standards but actually worked against them.

Moreover, the nature of their treason was of a kind peculiarly to exasperate Swift.

By continually emphasizing the theme that the Ancients lacked a methodology, the apologists for the Moderns were in fact replacing the standard of individual merit and endeavor by that of collective knowledge, so that now the question was always, “*What* did a man (such as Pythagoras) know?” and not “How did he come to know it?”

Admittedly an awareness of the incongruity of anyone’s being patronizing about Pythagoras did seep sufficiently into the contemporary consciousness to produce the defensive argument, which even Fontenelle and Wotton felt impelled to counter, that it was actually harder to develop an idea than to originate it (though even then Wotton went on to suggest that of the two activities the former might well be the more useful).

But, such minor exceptions aside, a complacent insistence on the paramountcy of method seems to have been pervasive, since it was now perfectly possible for a modern, confronted with the apparent comprehensiveness of Newton’s discoveries, to feel that there was very little left to discover about the “real” world and that what was required now was largely the consolidation and dissemination of knowledge.

It was this point of view, as manifested in connection with literature, that Swift attacked so admirably in “A Digression of the Modern Kind” and “A Digression in Praise of Digressions.” And his metaphor of the army of learning ravaging the territory it occupies has a painfully modern flavor, as do his comments upon the uses of indexes, compendiums, abstracts, and interpretative systems—“Authors need to be little consulted, yet critics and commentators and lexicons carefully must,” for example.

VIII

The nature of the impetus that all this gave to the further corruption of standards is clear. It was what Bacon had earlier pointed to when he extolled the scientific method for its ability to “place all wits and understandings nearly at a level.”

On the one hand we find Sprat attempting to lure polite gentlemen into the Royal Society by asking, “Are they affrighted at the difficulties of knowledge? Here they may meet with a study that as well fits the most negligent minds as the most industrious.”

On the other, with the help of proliferating aids to easy knowledge, the same gentlemen could presumably rapidly acquire the kind of nodding acquaintance with Virgil and “The Rules” that would confirm them in the self-satisfaction that the authors competing for their attention were engaged in promoting.

And the bearings that the fashionable concerns with method had for authors themselves Swift devastatingly indicates at the end of “A Digression in Praise of Digressions”:

By these means, in a few weeks, there starts up many a writer, capable of managing the profoundest and most universal subjects. But, what though his head be empty provided his common-place book be full.

And if you will bate him but the circumstances of method, and style, and grammar, and invention, allow him but the common privileges of transcribing from others, and digressing from himself, as often as he shall see occasion, he will desire no more ingredients towards fitting up a treatise that shall make a very comely figure on a bookseller’s shelf; there to be preserved neat and clean, for a long eternity, adorned with the heraldry of its title fairly inscribed on a label; never to be thumbed or greased by students nor bound to everlasting chains of darkness in a library; but when the fullness of time is come, shall happily undergo the trial of Purgatory, in order to ascend the sky.

IX

Brilliant though Swift was as a diagnostician of literary ills, we obviously wouldn’t go to *The Battle of the Books* or *A Tale of a Tub* for any purely literary criticism of a kind intended seriously for remedying them.

In a way, of course, his description of the ideal critic in “A Digression concerning Critics” is clear enough, with its talk of assisting intelligent

readers “to pronounce upon the productions of the learned, form [their] taste to a true relish of the sublime and the admirable, and divide every beauty of matter or of style from the corruption that apes it.”

And so is the conception of the self-discipline that writing should entail that comes out in “An Apology,” especially in the following:

The author assures those gentlemen who have given themselves that trouble with him [of attempting to answer the book] that his discourse is the product of the study, the observation, and the invention of several years, that he often blotted out much more than he left, and if his papers had not been a long time out of his possession, they must have still undergone more severe correction; and do they think such a building is to be battered with dirt-pellets however envenomed the mouths may be that discharge them.

But such passages do not really take us very far, and the obvious fact is that Swift’s concern with literature in these two books, especially *A Tale of a Tub*, was of another kind from that of a literary critic as described in the Digression. Though he spoke approvingly of the invention and use of critical “rules,” he himself was doing something more complicated, and I think more important.

X

Swift, as I have tried to show, was a man extraordinarily sensitive to the tendencies of certain of the beliefs of his time. And, as he sensed with that poetic intuitiveness not possessed by otherwise more intelligent contemporaries of his, such as Locke and Fontenelle, the ends towards which they were conducting were individual madness and the erection of ideologies having for their supporters the status of religion and leading, sooner or later, to the “Establishment of New Empires by Conquest.”

In *A Tale of a Tub* he was concerned with literature not as a commodity to be marketed and weighed but as something that was symptomatic of the ideas and moral health both of the individuals producing it and of the times in which they lived; and he judged ideas less for the “correctness” of their arguments than for their power to lead people towards or away from the kinds of virtues that he cherished.

I have tried to show how he attacked the essential illiteracy, ignorance, and intellectual self-complacency of his own period for edging the individual towards the spiritual passivity that was then to a considerable extent a philosophical ideal.

But he also saw beyond the smooth front of that ideal to the fact that rationalism always produces its own kind of unreason, and it is a mark of his genius that in “A Digression in the Modern Kind” he linked together the purely rationalistic and the occultist criticism of Homer.

Both were unhistorical, both went to the forms of the work rather than to the moral personality of the writer as a living force, both were part of a tendency to find easy ways to knowledge and power, and both, ultimately, conducted to the kind of madness the attack upon which, as Ricardo Quintana and Miriam Kosh Starkman have shown, forms the centre of *A Tale of a Tub*.

1955; reformatted 2008

Afterword, 1984

This essay, which was written a good while ago, is published here [in *The Name of Action*] for the first time, virtually without revisions. It has continued to interest me over the years because of the kinds of connections that I was able to make in it. And I was confirmed in my desire to include it by reading A.C. Elias, Jr.’s recent learned and ingenious *Swift at Moor Park: Problems in Biography and Criticism* (University of Philadelphia Press, 1982).

At this distance from the subject, I shall not put my hand on my heart and swear that the Swift whom I offer with such assurance is in all respects “the” Swift. But I am quite sure that “my” Swift is a more credible one than the low-keyed, petty, and academic ironist with whom Mr. Elias emerges from his dismantling of the standard account of Swift’s attitude to Temple by writers like Irvin Ehrenpreis.

“Whatever his areas of philosophical agreement with the great man, “Mr. Elias informs us, “Swift’s most cherished function in life was to smile at solemn human pretence, which all too often it was Temple’s unhappy fate—despite his best intention—to embody.”

In such a curiously old-fashioned formula, as in the book at large, we lose altogether the Swift of heroic pride and aspiration, the Swift who later on so relished feeling near the center of power during Harley and St. John's ministry, and whose subsequent comportment during his lifelong exile in the provinces is one of the most remarkable and poignant episodes in British literary history.

To judge from his book, Mr. Elias, with his evident and I suspect nowadays representative distaste for Temple's fondness for the heroic, seems unacquainted with the possibility that, as Yeats well knew, to aspire may be in some degree to become. And I am reminded of a colleague's remark apropos of the whole school of ironical academic revisionists, "They seem to think that reality must always be scandalous" (to which I added, "Or banal").

But to me, at least, it is obvious that just as it was possible for Temple to aspire to dignity and wisdom as a writer without thereby being hypocritical, so it was possible for Swift to be aware of flaws in Temple but at the same time admire the virtues to which Temple aspired.

Mr. Elias's Swift, compulsively pulling down Temple and his heroic virtues while going through the motions of praise, seems to me a writer incapable of passion, generosity, and greatness. I prefer the Swift who, in a complex transposition of Renaissance values, would later fight heroically for Ireland, and of whom in "Swift's Epitaph," Yeats wrote:

Imitate him if you dare,
World-besotted traveler; he
Served human liberty.

Afterword, 2008: Samuel Holt Monk, Scholar

I

The bibliographical notes to the paper have vanished, and I am no longer scholar enough to want to redo them. But as I recall, when I checked quotations for book publication they were accurate. The historical and literary judgments are my own. The learned and

passionate Swift scholar Samuel Holt Monk called the paper “awfully good.”

It was the first paper that I wrote for his three-term seminar at Minnesota—Swift in the first term, Pope in the third, and in-betweens in the second. All the topics were assigned. I did papers in the second term on Bernard Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees* and the Abbé Bouhours’ concept of the *je ne sais quoi*, the certain something that took one beyond the mere observance of “rules,” and wrote a final paper of over a hundred pages, virtually an M.A. thesis, on the architecturally oriented third Earl of Burlington. That was my first year as a Ph.D. student.

Monk obviously lived and breathed Swift, and generated an extraordinary buzz in the seminar. Swift was *alive* for him, and with him a wealth of detail about other figures and doings in those years, so that spaces of the historical imagination started opening up for us too. One felt that it was possible to be right oneself, I mean accurate and truth-telling, if one worked hard enough. But Monk wasn’t doing or promoting hagiography, or defending his own turf, though of course one was pleased when one pleased him.

My second paper was on Swift and the Duke of Marlborough, whom Monk said Swift hated. Not being inspired by the subject, I settled down with the then complete works of Swift and copied out every mention of Marlborough that I could find. I ended up arguing that “hate” wasn’t quite the right term, since in fact the chronological pattern was one of alternating condemnation and praise, as if Swift was on the prod against Marlborough for obvious political reasons but, faced with the evidence of his military genius, could not bring himself to withhold respect out of what would now be called reasons of political correctness—and then, self-correcting, returned to the attack.

I had no sense of violating taboos by doing this, nor did Monk react as if I had. And when in the course of the paper I referred to Swift’s “tipsy” letters to his young lady friends. Monk said, quizzically, that he had heard Swift accused of numerous failings, but this was the first time that he had heard him called a drunk. But, said I, at various times he says he’s sitting down to write after a convivial evening with Bolingbroke and Harvey, and obviously they were drinking *there*.

II

I'm not sure how original Monk was on Swift. A lot of what he said appeared to be in Ricardo Quintana on Swift, and his well-known and obviously strongly felt article on "The Pride of Lemuel Gulliver" seemed to me, later on, to be misguided. But from the point of view of students, these were advantages.

He wasn't trying to sell us his own patented write-it-down-on-the-back-of-an-index-card image of Swift. He simply wanted us to go with him into those times and spaces and encounters and try to get a fix on some of the things that were going on. And you knew that if you were to make a factual error he would know it for what it was, so you tried to avoid errors.

It all added up to an encounter with true scholarship, the real right thing, that I was very lucky to have had—an encounter, moreover, in which "knowledge enforced by firm detail" (J.V. Cunningham's phrase) did not get in the way of or work against critical intelligence and individual judgment. Later on, a Friday afternoon talk to the Department by Allen Tate, its chief luminary, was announced, which packed everyone into the lounge. Monk, virtually bowing and scraping before the great man and probably personal friend whom he was introducing, provided a brilliant introduction to the subject of the occasion, Tennyson's "Tithonus." After which Tate advanced to the lectern, read out the poem beautifully in that precise and slightly dry voice of his, and sat back down again. No doubt there were some questions.

Monk also, when the Department experimented with mass lectures by grown-ups to enrich our individual pedagogical endeavors, gave a brilliant forty-five-minute lecture on the nature and history of satire. When, later on, I sounded out the freshmen in my section, they preferred the performance of Leonard Unger, who had strolled on stage and offered some leisurely observations about I forget what.

Monk had been, I was told, the victim of a tragedy, the death in a boating accident of his wife and child. One had the feeling that his whole self, and a complex network of values, were involved in his dealings with Swift, whose world-view and challenges to self-

congratulatory modernizing he obviously, as a Southerner, found congenial.

The compleat scholar, and without any showboating, he was not “academic.” I was particularly lucky to have had him on Swift that year, and to have had to read a lot by Swift (and very little about him), since otherwise I might have been too easily contented with Leavis on him in the famous essay ending with, “We shall not find Swift remarkable for intelligence if we think of Blake.”

Gérard de Nerval and the Martians

(2009–2014)

i

My Enquiring Martian is back, the one who had trouble with doorbells and the thinking of Stanley Fish. The latter had particularly interested him because he himself is in the EcoPo area in his university (Ecological Poetry), with a specialty in Oceanism. He is obviously a nice bright person, with an archipelago mind—areas of knowledge separated by wide stretches of the unplumbed, salt, estranging sea of ignorance. Rather like my own in fact.

And modest. I must think him terribly provincial, he said, since he only has twenty-seven Smatterings, the Martian term for such bits of language as one possesses, and has never even visited Venus. I said that myself have only five, if you include English, and have never been to either end of my own small province. I said that I find it helps to think of myself as regional, which made him brighten up.

I say that literally. His face changed colours onscreen, like a cephalopod registering its changing moods.

He was also anxious to have me know that though AquaPo was his, well, academic water, he enjoyed ranging beyond it and entertaining colleagues with his findings.

He was particularly pleased with his discovery of an untitled quatrain that goes:

I'm aging Will, pleading in vain for help
As noon approaches. Don't forsake me now,
Grace, Angie, Ingrid, Lauren, oh my darlings,
Looking at you—but am I Dude or Chance?

He was deeply moved, he said, by this cry from the heart to the four goddesses as a crisis approaches which the self-assertive rationalist will, unable, as it must be (“We mortal millions live—alone”), to derive strength any longer from the merely secular, will not be able to handle, weakened as it is by the dawning Hamletian recognition that

its pose of ironical self-sufficiency may in actuality have nothing behind it but a concatenation of random elements.

What, he wondered, with a nervous flicker, did I myself think?

I said that he could have had a distinguished career as a scholar-critic on my own watery planet.

If only, he sighed. He did so envy us our wealth of litCrit, and the availability of litLit materials for it to work on. Some of his younger colleagues had suggested that a litLit text could sometimes be as interesting in its own way as litCrit, though of course never as original.

ii

He himself had recently, given his sub-specialty of Neo-Crustaceanism, been thrilled to hear of a French writer called Gérard de Nerval who walked a lobster on a ribbon—an ocean-blue one—through the gardens of a Royal Palace in 19th-century Paris. Could I tell him more about him?

Curiously, I could, and I quoted the sonnet by which Nerval is best known to Anglo readers. “El Desdichado.” It was one of four of his poems that I had recently translated, supplementing my own Smattering, with some heavy dictionary work.

Here it is.

The Disinherited / *El Desdichado*

*Je suis le Ténébreux,—le veuf,—l’inconsolé,
Le Prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie;*

I am the Darkling One, the widower, the unconsoled,
The Prince of Aquitaine in the ruined tower.
My only Star is dead, and my constellated lute
Bears the Black Sun of Melancholia.

In the night of the Tomb, oh my lost Comforter
Restore Posillipo and the Italian sea,
The flower that pleased my devastated heart,
And the trellis where the Vine and Rose unite.

Am I Eros or Phoebus? Lusignan or Biron?
My brow's still flushed from the embrace of the Queen.
I have dreamed in the Grotto where the Siren sings...

And twice, as a victor, I've traversed Acheron,
And interwoven upon Orpheus' lyre
The sighs of the Saint and the Fay's ecstatic cries.

But the water of Acheron wouldn't have been salt, would it? And there weren't any lobsters in it, were there?

I'm afraid not, I said.

I added that when I skimmed the three-hundred or so pages of verse in Nerval's collected works in search of others like the dozen sonnets, "Les Chimères," in which "El Desdichado" figures, I hadn't noticed any lobsters, crabs, or even crayfish. Prawns? he asked hopefully. Shrimps? Sorry, no, though my Smattering wasn't wholly to be trusted.

And those other writings of his? he asked, with what, to judge from an orange throb over his left eye, was a nervous persistence. He had, it was emerging, not just been seeking intellectual companionship, but was hunting for material that he could present at an upcoming AquaLit conference.

You mean those thirty-four-hundred prose pages in the *Pléiade* edition? I had only skimmed the surfaces, and a lot of it had seemed to be journalism of no obvious linguistic inventiveness. *But*, I said, there were several remarkable pieces of fiction in there with interesting theoretical implications, particularly *Sylvie*, *Angélique*, and *Aurélie*.

Look, I said, the itch being upon me, how would it be if I had a go at a paper that could figure, when you introduced me onscreen at the conference, as your "discovery"?

He jumped at the idea. Would I need, I asked, to be sparing of allusions that might be unfamiliar to some of the audience? Oh no, he said, not at all. We really do try to be professional in our—erm—regional way. We *like* allusions that we don't recognize. It makes us feel that what we do is serious, and gives us quests to go on.

I took him at his word.

So here is the text of the paper that I delivered onscreen to an appreciative interplanetary audience that reminded me of the space-bar in *Star Wars*.

***Lobsters and Door Belles:
Meet Gérard de Nerval***

[Sorry, his title, not mine.]

I

Distinguished fellow scholars; brilliant illuminati from the great planets of Mars, Mercury, and Venus; heroic explorers in the deep currents of thought; the first question that arises for me, as I have the honour to appear before you all, thanks to the persistence of your admirable confrere, is whether I have any right to do so.

There is a fisherman's prayer [the audience rustled and clicked appreciatively] that begins, "Oh God, thy sea is so great, and my boat is so small." I myself feel that way about my subject for today as proposed by our confrere, the 19th century French author, Gérard de Nerval—the multifariousness of his works, the tragic drama of his life, the abundance of litCrit about him, the blue-green lobster that he allegedly led on a blue ribbon through the gardens of the Palais Royale in Paris, opposite the Palace of the Louvre, earning himself the status of quintessential bohemian.

Born in Paris in 1808, with a father who had been a medical officer in Napoleon's *Grande Armée*, he was a point of multiple intersections.

His literary life, starting out as a young Romantic, admirer of Victor Hugo, friend of Théophile Gautier, Alexandre Dumas père, Charles Baudelaire, and others, first translator of Goethe's *Faust* into French, traveler, dramatist, music critic, and so on, who blows his inheritance on a literary journal, and has attacks of acute schizophrenia (perhaps drug-related) requiring hospitalization, and dies in poverty at forty-six by his own hand, has the dimensions of a novel written with the wisdom of hindsight by someone concerned to create a figure in whom numerous subsequent dispositions and strategies—Romantic, Symbolist, Surrealist, Postmodernist—can be observed in embryo.

No wonder so much has been written about him.

II

And like a true Romantic—I need only instance “The Ancient Mariner,” *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and that greatest of fish stories, *Moby Dick*— he appears to have done a good deal of voyaging himself. [Another rustle.]

My own amateur venture into Nerval scholarship began not long ago with Robert Emmet Jones’s admirably lucid *Gérard de Nerval*. And almost ended there.

In this authoritative-sounding take on him, Nerval knew so immensely much, and the arcane was so strong an element in his reading and consciousness, that a tyro is simply never going to be able to catch up, or to read with any sense of competence.

So, was this the end of the line for me, a mere Anglo codfish in among the barracudas of French intellection?

Well, fortunately, since I am a slow reader with a poor verbal memory and a wide-meshed Smattering through which much escapes, I followed it up with Richard Sieburth’s selection of texts from Nerval in the prestigious *Penguin Classics* series.

Here, blessedly, were things for me to read, rather than hear about. As D.A.F. de Sade (the Marquis) noted, the told can be more exciting than the actualities, as witness the *frisson* induced by references to “unspeakable cruelties,” and that dungeon well in Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum” (“oh, any horror but this!”), and the Poe-esque fictions of H.P. Lovecraft,

Furthermore I was pleased to find that I *was* reading, without a sense of getting out of my depth, even with the Chimera poems, This wasn’t like peering helplessly into the reflecting pools of Mallarmé’s later sonnets or some of those poems of that most Mallarméan of American poets, Edgar Bowers.

III

Here, for instance, also in my own translation, is a sonnet focussing on a headland overlooking the *Bay* of Naples, with a history of volcanic activity, and reportedly the site of Virgil's tomb. Myrtho herself is apparently Venus.

Myrtho / *Myrtho*

*Je pense à toi, Myrtho, divine enchanteresse,
Au Pausilippe altier, de mille feux brillant*

Myrtho, I think of you, O divine enchantress,
On lofty Pausilippe, aglow with a thousand fires,
Your brows drenched with the lights of the Orient,
And dark grapes mingling with the gold of your tresses.

It is from your cup too that I have drunk rapture,
And from the secret glints of your smiling eye
When I was found praying at the feet of Dionysus,
The Muse having made me one of the sons of Greece.

I know why the volcano has reopened down there...
It is because your nimble feet touched it yesterday.
And suddenly the horizon has been covered with ashes.

Since the time when a Norman duke broke your clay idols,
Always, under the branches of Virgil's laurel,
The pale hydrangea joins with the green myrtle.

[1854]

There's nothing especially problematic there, is there? It's a rich pre-Nietzschean yearning to be able to access the Dionysiac energies of a pre-Christian Mediterranean, imbued with a sense of volcanic energies still alive there from before the time when Christianity put an end, as it was thought, to pagan idolatry.

For that matter—fortunately I can't be hooked off-stage now like an inadequate baggy-pants vaudeville clown,—I am not convinced that even “El Desdichado” is really so *noli me tangere* esoteric as it has come to seem.

Here it is again.

The Disinherited / *El Desdichado*

*Je suis le Ténébreux,—le veuf,—l'inconsolé,
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie;*

I am the Darkling One, the widower, the unconsoled,
The Prince of Aquitaine in the ruined tower.
My only Star is dead, and my constellated lute
Bears the Black Sun of Melancholia.

In the night of the Tomb, oh my lost Comforter
Restore Posillipo and the Italian sea,
The flower that pleased my devastated heart,
And the trellis where the Vine and Rose unite.

Am I Eros or Phoebus? Lusignan or Biron?
My brow's still flushed from the embrace of the Queen.
I have dreamed in the Grotto where the Siren sings...

And twice, as a victor, I've traversed Acheron,
And interwoven upon Orpheus' lyre
The sighs of the Saint and the Fay's ecstatic cries.

There are scholarly disagreements about the allusions to the Prince, Lusignan, Biron (I won't inflict my own hypotheses on you), and there may, I say may, since in the absence of unambiguous pointers by Nerval himself I prefer to keep my pockets buttoned, be a detailed medieval narrative about the Fay (*Fée*) that his informed readers would have recognized.

But the words still have semantic heft, and as with algebra, we can know how a term is functioning even if we don't know its precise value. As in fact happens, doesn't it? with a lot of our own youthful reading.

When in 1944 I myself was discovering modernity on my own and came upon a poem in the school library that opened,

Webster was much possessed by death
And saw the skull beneath the skin;

And breastless creatures underground
Leaned backward with a lipless grin,

I assumed that Webster was simply one of T.S. Eliot's fictive characters, like Sweeney. Learning later that the allusion was to John Webster, Jacobean author of *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, merely extended the characterization of those feelings.

Some commentaries on "El Desdichado" (I can recommend J.R.R. Tolkien's to you) read as though the speaker were indeed the Prince of Aquitaine in the ruined tower and we were in a mindscape as mysterious as that of Browning's proto-Symbolist Childe Roland after reaching *his* Dark Tower.

Well, "El Desdichado" is indeed remarkable in that every assertion in it is figurative. But the procedure is obviously that of a present "I" turning to a more or less familiar classical and medieval iconography for analogies to his own situation.

A power-figure, his estate dwindled down to a single near-ruin; a lute, present in numerous paintings as emblem of creativity; an inspirational woman ("star") now dead; the benign recalled organicism of the classical Mediterranean; the different character patterns at work in himself; heroic adventurings like those of Classical heroes in a myth-filled world; different modes of creative utterance—these are not obscure or arcane, though each allusion brings with it a penumbra of associations.

For me it is realworld and in front of the door, not a portal to grandiose quasi-Platonic abstractions or the archetypically biographical—the unshown, the unembodied, the merely asserted.

IV

In saying which, I am emboldened by a delightful earlier poem of Nerval's that is patently in front of the door. Here it is, again in a translation of mine.

The Cousin / *La Cousine*

*L'hiver a ses plaisirs ; et souvent, le dimanche,
Quand un peu de soleil jaunit la terre blanche,*

Winter has its pleasures, and often, on Sunday
When a little sunshine yellows the white ground,
One goes out for a walk with a girl cousin . . . —
Now don't you make us have to wait dinner,

Says her mother. And when one's had a good look
Outside the Tuileries at the flowered dresses under the black trees,
The young girl feels cold . . . and points out to you
That the evening mist is starting to rise.

And one goes back, talking about the lovely day
That one's sorry has ended so soon (flirting discreetly),
And you smell from the bottom of the stairs,
Coming in with a big appetite, the roasting turkey.

[ca 1830–32]

There is an intelligible spectrum from the lovely psychological fullness here that needs no allegorizing to acquire significance, through the mingled literalness and figurativeness of “Myrtho,” to the fully figurative but still, in my own take on it, realworld “El Desdichado.” The young genius Arthur Rimbaud, I'm sure, knew “La Cousine,” the Rimbaud of “Au Cabaret Vert,” with its bread, and ham, and garlic, and friendly buxom waitress, and that glorious mug of beer with the foam touched by a late-afternoon sunbeam.

And I am going to take this opportunity, if you will bear with me, push back against the prestige of behind-the-door knowledge, or what passes for knowledge rather than unanchored speculations.

No disrespect [I added diplomatically] is intended in my reference to the Ocean, that prodigious being that surrounds my own province with its smiling calms and homicidal angers.

The allure of the unlimited and mysterious, the *transformative*, as voiced in Poe and in poems like Baudelaire's “Le Voyage” and Mallarmé's “Brise Marine” (“Sea Breeze”), has been a major one,

extending into the imaginings of Space. But the ocean in Conrad and the great Breton poet Tristan Corbière is not a *mystical* one in which one can lose one's own too constricted self. On the contrary, it is, memorably, a zone of more concentrated and attentive selves, the selves of mariners navigating among dangers by means of acquired skills and knowledge and reasoning.

And as more and more becomes known about its deeps and their amazing denizens, the result is enrichment, not impoverishment.

V

There is an evident assumption in some litCrit that Mind, especially that of what is taken to be genius, is a single pulsing quivering marvellous organic unity, like that of Andrew Marvell's Garden, in which

The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find.
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other seas

Or a mysterious underground lake, like the one, if I can dare to mention him here, in H.G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*.

[I needn't have mimed worry. In fact, as I learned afterwards, George Pal's first and best movie version of *The War in the Worlds* enjoyed a festive ongoing life among young Martians like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, with rapturous applause for the devastation and hilarious dissings of the bad guys—us—, while, higher up the mind-chain, litCrit was enriched with numerous comparisons with other narratives in which heroes, such as Roland at Roncesvalles, go down to honourable defeat.]

In the aquatic view of mind, everything that enters into it permeates it, so that all the supposed truths disclosed to Nerval during his eclectic reading are there together cumulatively, the way water is permeated by minerals.

Hence one can not only read forwards from those "facts" to the remarkable dozen sonnets in *Les Chimères*, but take the most

memorable of them, “El Desdichado,” as an essentializing from which one can move back into the other eleven, and other works..

VI

This all seems to me wrong about Mind in principle (and practice), and wrong about what can go on in the fourteen lines of a linguistic artifact that is not (to shift analogies) a map or chart into which all manner of Empsonian immensities may enter, but a score for speaking, an utterance in time in which syntax, diction, meter, and figures all interact in the construction of meaning and feeling.

It is a *short* voicing, even though a richness of texture can make it feel longer. A song is not an oratorio, and you can only do so much in the first, and overloading it will hinder its progression, since one can only assimilate so much as one listens. And different things are done in different ways.

Marvell’s “The Garden” celebrates the bliss of a freedom from political and heterosexual striving. His “To My Coy Mistress” is a brilliant, aggressive incitement to fucking. “An Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland” is an *engagé* work of political analysis.

Each is its own self, its own kind of action. We do not ask which of them is the “real” Marvell. What *that* is, if one wants to use the term, is them and all the other speech acts together, some of them at much lower levels of intensity.

Wallace Stevens included in his first book of verse, *Harmonium*, poems as diverse as “Sunday Morning,” “The Snow Man,” and “The Emperor of Ice Cream.”

Nerval’s “La Cousine” exists alongside “Myrtho” and isn’t superseded by it. One of the marks of poetic distinction is the ability to distill a variety of experiences and perceptions into individuating forms.

VII

The beautiful, bold, and impeccably crafted “El Desdichado,” with its richly figurative evocation of loss and remembered happiness, and the

tensile strength whereby it does not in fact collapse into self-pity and silence in the sestet, is one kind of speech act.

But it is by no means the only kind in which Nerval's incessantly active intelligence is on display.

With that in mind, I shall now glance at those major prose fictions, *Sylvie*, *Angélique*, and *The Salt Smugglers*, plus *Aurélie*.

I shall do a good deal of quoting. These are works where quoting is much better than summarizing, at least if one wants to experience their all-important textures.

The textures are what I am primarily concerned with, and I will not sheep-dog or dolphin you to what, as theme-dominated wholes, the works seem to me to be "about." There will have been more than enough of that elsewhere, by scholar-critics much better equipped than myself.

In other words, it is the quotations themselves, in their fullness, that demonstrate what I myself am "about," in my endeavour to show that you don't need to go behind the door in search of significances that aren't there in the texts in front of you—that is, if you make your way through them without the skipping encouraged by the belief that every passage of "real" literature has an expository point, and that the function of the passage is to illustrate the point.

I shall begin with the psychological and rhetorical inwardness of the amazing *Sylvie*, that compact novella of some 13,000 words from 1856.

VIII

[At this point, as I paused to take in some water, after holding the glass respectfully up to the light, I noticed towards the rear of the auditorium a small forest of tentacles going through the motion of clapping. To judge from some glances sent in that direction, this may have been considered bad form. From what planet had the applauders come? But several heads in the front rows were gravely inclined towards me.]

Sylvie

Richard Sieburth reports that “In a 1909 essay on ‘Sylvie,’ drafted as he was about to embark on his own epic investigation into time lost and regained, Marcel Proust discerned in the condensed compass of Nerval’s novella the germ of his own magnum opus to come.”

[He] observed that to read “Sylvie” for the first time was to experience a disorientation verging on mild panic. Forced at every moment to leaf back to the preceding page just to get his textual bearings (particularly during the seven nocturnal chapters of the novella), the reader—like the narrator himself—feels perilously lost in the woods, casting about for a few familiar landmarks that might distract him from the illusory spoors of the past and at last allow him to reach some sort of mappable vantage point in present time and space. (*Selected Writings*, 64)

But it’s not as though there were no anchoring, no base-line of discourse anywhere in this novella that feel much longer than its thirty-four pages in Sieburth.

On the second page is the following brilliant account of what things were like back in the 1830s for bright young men like the well-born narrator, with the ruined Emperor, though he doesn’t mention him, dead out on St. Helena’s barely a decade earlier.

We were then living in a strange period, one of those eras that usually follow in the wake of revolutions or the declines of great reigns. But its hallmark was no longer the heroic gallantry of the Fronde, the stylish vice of the Regency, or the skepticism and outlandish debauchery of the Directory. It was instead a mixture of activity, hesitation and indolence, an assortment of dazzling Utopias, religious or philosophical aspirations, vague enthusiasms and dim intimations of renaissance in which a general weariness with the discords of the past was blended with ill-defined hopes for the future—a period, in short, not unlike the age in which Petronius or Apuleius lived.

Material man longed for the bouquet of roses which would regenerate him at the hands of the lovely Isis; forever young, forever pure, the goddess would appear to us at night, filling us with shame for having so wasted the hours of day. Worldly

ambitions, however, meant little to our generation; the greedy scramble for honours and positions in which everybody was then engaged only served to distance us from all possible spheres of activity.

The sole refuge left to us was the poets' ivory tower—which we climbed, higher and higher, in order to isolate ourselves from the crowd. Having been guided to these heights by our masters, we at last breathed the pure air of solitude, drinking ourselves into oblivion from the golden cup of fable, drunk with poetry and love—love, alas, of vague shapes, of blue and rosy hues, of metaphysical phantoms. Seen close, any real woman seemed too gross to our starry-eyed sensibilities. She had to appear a queen or goddess: above all, she had to lie beyond reach. (146)

IX

We have already learned how he himself, “night after night, would make my appearance in one of the stage boxes, dressed in the elegant garb of an ardent suitor,” and how when a particular actress was on stage,

I felt myself alive in her, and she lived for me alone. Her every smile filled me with infinite bliss; each quaver of her voice, so gentle and yet so profoundly resonant, sent shivers of joy and love through me. For me she was utter perfection, an answer to my every rapture, my every whim....

For an entire year it had not even occurred to me to find out who or what she might really be; I was afraid to cloud the magic mirror that cast her image back to me. (145)

No, this is certainly not a sage whom we're hearing about. Nor is the rest of the novella particularly cerebral or, as we have come to understand the terms, modernist or postmodernist.

The slippages, elisions, lacunae, uncertainties in his perceptions, recollections, dreams, imaginings are not offered as manifesting a new kind of abstract wisdom and order, or applauded for their subversiveness. They have psychological heft. They are how minds, or at least this one, can work. But we aren't into a swamp of mere

solipsistic subjectivity. The moves are always heuristic, the moves of a mind concerned not with *the* truth, *la Verité*, but with local truths, local perceptions, local recollections, or what appear to be recollections, re-entering the mind involuntarily or sought out by it.

There is no superior self standing outside them, like that of James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or Vladimir Nabokov in *Pale Fire*.

Which does not, however, mean that we are into the disjunctions and fragmentation of *The Waste Land*, or the corrosive rhetorical scepticism of Alain Robbe-Grillet.

Nor do we have the unresolvable mysteriousness of Poe's best stories and poems, which Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and others admired.

There are rhetorical difficulties of a sort, which must have been more pronounced at the time, in the shiftings between past and present tenses, and in how, expecting linear narratives of events in a paragraph, one is drawn away into chains of associations. But the prose, when read attentively, is always clear in its renderings of the physical.

X

The in-the-present part of the plot of *Sylvie*, such as it is, is minimal.

Having suddenly had his fortune restored by an upturn in his investments, the middle-aged narrator reflects that he can now afford the actress who "is" the woman of his dreams. But how to go about it without losing the dreams?

The re-entry of the past into his consciousness that night is rightly famous:

As I vaguely ran my eye over the newspaper I was still holding in my hands, my attention was caught by these two lines: "*Fête du Bouquet provincial*—Tomorrow the archers of Senlis will present *the* bouquet to the archers of Loisy." These few simple words awoke a whole new series of impressions in my mind: they brought back a memory of country life I had long forgotten, a

distant echo of the innocent festivals of my youth. The far-off sound of drum and horn was drifting through the hamlets and woods; the young girls were weaving garlands and tying ribbons around bouquets, singing all the while. A heavy wagon, drawn by oxen, was receiving those offerings as it passed; and we, the children of these parts, were escorting it with our bows and arrows, imagining ourselves knights of old—unaware that we were merely repeating from age to age a Druidic festival that had survived all subsequent monarchies and forms of religion. (148)

In bed that night, “in a half-sleep, my entire youth passed through my memory. This state in which the mind is still fending off the bizarre concatenations of dream, often allows one to see the most salient tableaux of an extended period of life compressed into a few minutes.” (148–9)

And what unscrolls before his mind’s eye is an episode (tableau?) in which as a boy he goes to a fête in the grounds of a château with, as it seems to him, his true love, the peasant girl Sylvie, only to be drawn towards the lovely aristocratic Adrienne, to whom when they are together for a moment in a folk dance he gives a ritual kiss. After which, she sings—and what singing!

Everybody sat down around her, and in a voice that was at once fresh, piercing, and yet slightly gauzy (like the voices of so many of the girls in this land of mists) she proceeded to sing one of those old ballads, full of melancholy and love, which inevitably tell of some princess who has been locked away in a tower by her father as a penalty for having fallen in love...

As she sang, the shadows came down from the great trees and she stood there alone, lit by the first rays of the moon, set apart from our attentive circle. She stopped singing and no one dared break the silence. The clouds of mist drifted over the lawn, spreading tufts of white upon the tips of the grass. We thought we were in paradise. (149)

He plaits a wreath and crowns her with it, and she stands there, this aristocrat in whose veins flows, perhaps the blood of ancient kings, like Dante’s Beatrice.

The hurt Sylvie goes mute on him.

XI

Afterwards,

Obliged to return to Paris to resume my studies, I carried a double image off with me—of a tender friendship that had sadly gone awry and of a love at once impossible and ill-defined, a source of aching thought which no amount of schoolroom philosophizing could allay.

It was the sole figure of Adrienne that triumphed in the end—a mirage of glory and beauty whose company sweetened my hours of strenuous schoolwork. The following year, during the holidays, I learned that this lovely girl whom I had scarcely glimpsed had been placed in a nunnery by her family.

And he reports that

To me, this half-dreamt memory explained everything. This vague, hopeless love I had conceived for an actress, this love which swept me up every evening when the curtain rose, only to release me when sleep finally descended, had its seed in the memory of Adrienne, a night-flower blooming in the pale effulgence of the moon, a phantom fair and rosy gliding over the green grass half-bathed in white mist.

This resemblance to a figure I had long forgotten was now taking shape with singular vividness; it was a pencil sketch smudged by time that was now turning into a painting, like those studies by the Old Masters that one has admired in some museum, only to discover their dazzling original somewhere else.

To be in love with a nun in the guise of an actress!... and what if they were one and the same? It is enough to drive one mad—the fatal lure of the unknown, drawing one ever onward like a will-o'-the-wisp flitting over the rushes of a stagnant pool... Let's try to regain our grip on reality. (150–151; ellipses sic)

XII

He decides to return to the village in search of the grown-up Sylvie, whom he hasn't seen for several years.

Beyond Louvres there is a lane lined with apple trees whose flowers I have often seen glimmer in the night like the stars above—it was a short cut to the outlying villages. While the coach is making its way up the hills, let us piece together the memories of the days when I often visited those parts. (152)

Which he proceeds to do.

It is an affair of remembered episodes, in a part of the country whose history, going far back, he knows about, and in which there are traces of other pasts. But it isn't, in its predominantly present-tense presentation, the conventional progression from fiction to fact in which the experiences of youth are re-seen through more mature eyes, the way the larger-than-life figures of Proust's Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes, initially imagined romantically from a distance entirely in terms of their roles as great aristocrats, become later on, for Marcel and us, flesh-and-blood and flawed social beings.

There are no tidy boundaries between factuality and fictivemess. These are episodes with an unusual degree of theatricality of settings—A Wood at Night, A Ruined Convent, A Peasant Interior, A Château, as it were—, and symbol-laden festive rituals, and transformative roles. But the “meaning” of the symbolizings does not reside in what they point to in an Elsewhere. The aura of a power charged type-figure—religious, aristocratic—in an earlier period is not *the* reality that is being recalled now in a less substantial form. The power, the plenitude, the heightening of possibilities in the theatricals, as described, are *now*, and potent even when one knows nothing about past analogues. The potency of Adrienne singing in those magical moments *is* those moments.

And the conventional boundaries of centuries and periods, each with its supposed characteristics, blur and blend and lose the easy distinction between presentness and pastness, as they do when someone disturbed by something wonders indignantly what century one is in. So also with the distinction between the natural and the made. The marvellously evoked natural beauties, particularly at night,

are those of humanized estates in which elements added when the owners were more powerful are crumbling or being covered over.

Borders blur too with respect to “mind,” particularly those conventionally operative in goal-seeking quest narratives. The narrator is not a “character” in the novelistic sense of being a cluster of established behaviours, tastes, prejudices, self-presentations, strategies that can be summed up by himself or his author. He is moved by feelings that he hasn’t organized, whether at that earlier dance or now, and an uncertainty about roles, that affect the kinds of orderings that he *has* achieved. And the erotic is not a Romantic affair of pursuit and capture.

Here, then, are a couple more episodes, one small-scale but not lightweight, the other wider-angled.

XIII

In a famously *strange* example of that key Surrealist term *l’insolite*, he and Sylvie, in their teens, go to visit her great-aunt in her cottage and ascend to the bedroom, at the aunt’s suggestion, in search of some old lace which Sylvie, now a lace-maker herself, might use as patterns.

An old painting up there of the newly-wed aunt and her handsome gamekeeper husband grips Sylvie’s attention, and, with nothing said about the narrator’s leaving the room, she puts on her aunt’s shot-silk wedding dress.

“We’ll need some powder,” I said, “we’re sure to find some.” She rummaged around some more in the drawers. What a treasure trove! How sweetly it all smelled, how the cheap trinkets and bright colours all glittered and gleamed! Two mother-of-pearl fans that were slightly damaged, pasteboard boxes with Chinese motifs, an amber necklace and myriad other trifles, among which two small white felt shoes with buckles incrustated with imitation diamonds.

“Oh, let me put them on,” said Sylvie, “let’s see if we can find the embroidered stockings to go with them.”

As he goes downstairs to where the aunt has been frying eggs and bacon,

Sylvie's voice called me back upstairs. "Quick, you get dressed too!" she said, and now, entirely consumed herself, she showed me the gamekeeper's wedding outfit laid out on the chest of drawers. In an instant I was transformed into a bridegroom of another century. Sylvie was waiting for me on the landing, and the two of us proceeded down the stairs hand in hand . . .

We were bride and bridegroom the whole, fine summer day. (159–160)

XIV

On another occasion, he and Sylvie's brother intrude into a theatrical revival at the château, the intensity building up gloriously in the first paragraph and then—but read on.

What I saw performed was a mystery play from the days of old. The costumes which consisted of long robes, varied only in their colour—azure, hyacinth, dawn. The action took place among the angels, amidst the debris of the devastated earth. Each voice sang in turn of the various splendours of this vanished world, and the angel of death spelled out the causes of its destruction. A spirit rose from the abyss, holding a flaming sword in its hand, and summoned the others to come and admire the glory of Christ, vanquisher of hell.

The spirit was Adrienne, transfigured by her costume, as she already was by her vocation. The halo of gilt cardboard around her angelic head seemed to us, quite naturally, a circle of light; her voice had gained in power and range, its every birdlike warble embroidering the phrases of a stately recitative with the infinite filigree of Italian song. (161)

The questioning in the next paragraph is not destructive. There is no implication in it of any inevitable collapsing back of the exalted into the everyday, or of the merely imagined, if that is what it is, being without value because unreal.

The beauty is there, whether elicited by the event itself or by what, in recollection, the event had elicited as a natural enlargement of itself. And the “real” in this second paragraph—the symbolic objects, the actualities of French history—is not banal.

As I retrace these details, I tend to wonder if they are real or if I have dreamt them. Sylvie’s brother was a bit tipsy that evening. We had stopped off for a few minutes in the keeper’s lodge where—and this impressed me greatly—outside, there was a swan splayed upon the door and, inside, tall armoires of carved walnut, a large encased clock, and various bows and arrows mounted as trophies above a red and green shooting target. A strange dwarf, wearing a Chinese cap, holding a bottle in one hand and a ring in the other, seemed to be inviting the archers to take their aim. The dwarf I believe was cut out of sheet-iron.

But, he asks himself now,

is the vision of Adrienne as real as these details or the incontrovertible existence of the abbey of Châalis? And yet it was surely the keeper’s son who had ushered us into the hall where the performance was taking place; we stood by the door at the back of a large audience which was solemnly sitting there, deeply moved. It was Saint Bartholomew’s Day—a day singularly associated with the memory of the Medici whose arms, conjoined with those of the House of Este, decorated these ancient walls ...

Perhaps this memory is an obsession? Luckily the carriage is just now coming to a stop on the route to Plessie; I am escaping from the world of reverie and only have a quarter of an hour’s walk along the back roads before I reach Loisy. (161–162; ellipsis sic)

This is, brilliantly, a psychological novel, not a philosophical one, even if philosophical extrapolations can be made from it about identity and perception and social structurings. And it isn’t a disintegrative one, or a mystification in which, with a tap of the conjurer’s wand or flourish of handkerchief, resemblance becomes identity.

XV

At the end of his introductory remarks about *Sylvie*, Sieburth informs us that:

Like the celebrated overture to *Combray*, the first half of “Sylvie” places us within the particular gravitational warp of a consciousness experiencing a free fall through space and time, half-waking, half-dreaming, visited by a succession of apparently disconnected memories that branch back through adolescence and childhood and sink into the strata of the Valois’s legendary past, the Utopian Enlightenment of Rousseau and the Illuminati, the pagan Renaissance of Catherine de Medici, the early Gothic of Châlis and Senlis, the battle sites of the Romans and Gauls, the shadowy forest tribes of the Sylvaneers, the looming Druid rocks.
... (64)

I can only report that I didn’t experience the narrative myself in that perhaps rather American fashion, with its hunger for ultimate depths. Nerval wasn’t here the H.P. Lovecraft of “The Rats in the Walls” before the fact.

No, the past in *Sylvie* is not a deconstructive intrusion into the real or supposed real of the present. It is a part of the present, a shaping of consciousness in the present. One more quotation, then.

On his way to visit Sylvie again, he walks, during a silent noon of summer perfection, along a forest road.

When I saw the glitter of the lake through the branches of the willows and hazels, I recognized it as a spot to which my uncle had often taken me in the course of his walks: it was the *Temple of Philosophy*, an edifice its founder had not been fortunate enough to complete. Its form is that of the temple of the Tiburtine sibyl and, still standing in the shelter of a group of pines, it displays the names of all the great thinkers from Montaigne and Descartes to Rousseau. This unfinished structure is now no more than a ruin gracefully entwined with ivy, its steps loosened by the invading bramble.

As a young child, it was here that I had witnessed ceremonies at which young girls clad in white were awarded prizes for academic

excellence and good conduct. Where are the rose-bushes which once surrounded the hill? The eglantine and raspberry hide the last of them, now reverting to the wild. As for the laurels, have they all been cut?—to quote the song of those lasses who'll to the woods no more. No, these shrubs from fair Italy have simply perished under our misty skies.

Fortunately, Virgil's privet still flourishes, as if to underscore the words of the master inscribed above the portal: *Rerum cognoscere causas!* Yes, this temple is crumbling like so many others, and man, weary or forgetful will turn away from its threshold while nature, indifferent to all, reclaims the terrain that art tried to wrest from her; but the thirst for knowledge will live on forever, the spur of all vitality and all action! (165–166)

XVI

That final sentence is worthy of note. For it is clear that “knowledge,” here, refers primarily to the kinds of knowledge sought and displayed in these pages. It does not refer to mere discourse, however clever, or to the philosophical compulsion that Yeats was pointing to in “Meru,” where

... man's life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravening through century after century

Ravening, raging and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality:
Egypt and Greece, good-bye, and good-bye, Rome !

We do not, in *Sylvie*, have the kind of implosion and collapse that menaced or overtook various other minds with the fading of high-Romantic exultations—the menace of a draining away of meaning and value as felt at various times by writers like Senancourt, Mallarmé, Hofmannsthal, Valéry; the state of mind described by poor Henri-Frédéric Amiel in his journal in the terrible 1850s in which

I hold so lightly to all phenomena that they end by passing over me like gleams over a landscape, and are gone without leaving any impression. Thought is a kind of opium; it can intoxicate us, while

still broad awake; it can make transparent the mountains and everything that exists.

(Henri-Frédéric Amiel, *Amiel's Journal* [London, 1889], 9.

Or rather, while the two-page final section of *Sylvie* begins with, “Such are the chimera that beguile and misguide us in the morning of life,” there is a reversal here that is not the present fashionable one of Theory, in which an ostensible fullness is invariably emptied out in a “realistic” death of value.

The realworld Sylvie and Aurélie, the actress whose image he had adored at the start of the narrative, have become, not unamiably, more solid characters in their own right, as conveyed especially in how they speak.

And the disclosed multi-perceivings of the whole narrative, conveyed with an imaginative energy that is rooted in all the vibrant realworld details, are also there in their own right, more solidly, because of the poetic speed-ups and compressions, than what Proust, with his less physically energetic Marcel, would provide in *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

XVII

When the narrator tells us that “Illusions fall away one after another like the husks of fruit, and that fruit is experience. It is bitter to the taste, but there is fortitude to be found in gall—forgive my old-fashioned turns of phrase”(106), we have, it seems to me, something that corresponds to how “El Desdichado” does not simply stop with the lamenting of the octave.

In the sestet (“Et j’ai deux fois vainqueur traversé l’achéron,” he takes comfort in his *actions*, not all that far in the past, and the synthesizings that he achieved of two normally separated modes as experienced most intensely (it seems permissible to infer) in those breakdowns, which we will find him talking about, without self pity, in *Aurélie*.

In any event, the real “mind” in *Sylvie* is the workings that we participate in, in their amazing complexity, in front of the door, and not some fictive construct, out of sight, that has been hypothesized, much

more thinly, by some academic who assumes, coming later, and armed with impressive jargon, that he or she understands the author better than the author did himself.

But that is not a swipe at Professors Jones and Sieburth.

XVIII

Angélique

The 72-page *Angélique* is sometimes very funny, with a muscular lucidity that comes from a grasp of character, rather than mere word-juggling, and an unintimidated eye for the odd. This is a grounded, not a manic, exuberance.

Nerval himself had extracted *Angélique* from his glorious *The Salt Smugglers* (*Les Faux Saulniers*), serialized in a newspaper in 1850, and taking off from a preposterous (real) law forbidding newspapers, upon pain of heavy fines, from publishing serialized novels, especially ones featuring *l'Amour*.

The narrative in both is a quasi-Sternean explanation, in a series of letters to his editor, of how the narrator has been scrupulously factual in his account of his quest for biographical information about a particular cleric, the Abbé de Bucquoy, with research trips, and burrowings in libraries and bookstores in search of a volume he'd glanced at in Frankfurt.

Since he wants his reader(s) to experience that quest in all its details, and with all its perplexities, he is able, in a rich medley of digressions, but without Sterne's stylistic mannerisms, to bring in anything that feels remotely relevant, including, in *The Salt Smugglers*, a performing seal.

“He's approaching the edge of the pool, said the trainer. He's sniffing out the herrings to see if they are fresh... If they are not, he'll refuse to put on a good show.”

The seal seemed to be satisfied and proceeded to say *Pappa* and *Mamma* with a Northern accent whose intonations nonetheless did not interfere with intelligibility of the syllables.

“He’s talking Dutch, said the sergeant. I thought you said he had been caught in Cape *Verrrde!*”

—True enough. But even when they swim south they don’t lose their accent... These are trips they take during the summer, for health reasons, then they return back north—unless, that is, they are caught, as was the case with this one, so they can get to visit Versailles.”

(*The Salt Smugglers; History of the Abbé de Bucquoy*, tr. Richard Sieburth [Archipelago Books, 2009], 22–23; ellipses sic)

[I won’t indicate the laughs that started coming , but they were gratifyingly numerous, and the changing colours and waving tentacles were carnivalesque.]

XIX

Here are the journalist-narrator of *Angélique* and his bucolic friend Sylvain (the brother of Sylvie, actually, but there are no references to her), the two of them bearded and obviously not from around those parts, being asked for their papers by a police officer, which of course they don’t have. The ellipsis marks are in the text.

My Breton friend was seething—which was not helping the situation.

I said to him, “Calm down. Let me handle this, I virtually qualify as a member of the diplomatic corps. Over the course of my travels I have come face to face with kings, pashas and even padishahs. I know how to deal with the authorities.”

“*Monsieur le commissaire*,” I said to the police officer (one should always address people by their rightful titles), “I have traveled to England on three occasions and was never asked to show my passport except upon leaving France. ... I have just come back from Germany, where I traveled though ten sovereign states, including Hesse; even the Prussians never asked me for my passport.”

“Well, I’m asking you for it here in France.”

“You’re aware that criminals always have their papers in order ...”

“Not always.”

He had me there.

“I have lived in these parts for seven years, I even own some property around here...”

“But you have no papers?”

“Correct ... Do you think that a potential suspect would just saunter in for a drink in a café filled with off-duty gendarmes?”

“It might be just another ruse to escape detection.”

I saw I was dealing with a mastermind here.

(Selected Writings, 93–94)

And there are great moments after the narrator gets hold of a manuscript in which “that lovely adventuress” Angélique de Longueval, high-born great-aunt of the Abbé de Bucquoy, recalls in an MS memoir her elopement and rackets life with one of her father’s servants, the wastrel son of a pork-butcher.

Here she is, accompanied by her lover, breaking into her parents’ strong-box with a kitchen shovel to get at the silverware that will finance their elopement.

She found a pile of silver plates, which she handed over to La Corbinière. She was about to dig out more, when he said, “Don’t take any more out, the sack is full.”

She wanted to take more articles—such as bowls, chandeliers, and ewers. But he said, “We’ll never be able to carry it all.” (*Selected Writings*, 105)

I love that “chandeliers”.

Here they are in the coach.

Somewhere beyond Moulins, a man who was in the coach—and who claimed to be a gentleman—began mumbling:

“Do we have a young lady here dressed as a man?”

To which La Corbinière replied:

“Yes there is, sir... Would you care to make anything of it? I believe I have the right to dress my wife any bloody way I choose.” (106)

(She is wearing boots and spurs.)

Here is the autodidact Sylvain, “a talented and thoughtful fellow.”

He has his own ideas about everything. He can assemble a pocket watch...or a compass. The only thing that bothers him about watches is that you can’t get their chains to stretch far enough. And the only thing that bothers him about compasses is that their needles can only register the magnetic attraction of the pole. (136)

XX

On the first day of the 1848 Revolution, a bibliophile makes his way through the mob to the Palais-National.

“My friends,” he asked, “has the *Perceforest* burned?”

“No, we’re just burning carriages.”

“Very well. Carry on then. And the library?”

“Hasn’t been touched ... What do you want, anyway?”

“I want them to spare the four-volume edition of *Perceforest*, a hero of yore ... an irreplaceable edition, with two pages that have been transposed and a large ink stain in the third volume.”

He was told: “Check with the first floor.” Where, not unreasonably, “they looked at him as if he were stark mad.” (121–122)

On another occasion a bibliophile is trying, increasingly desperately, to extract from a blandly stonewalling fellow-collector a little volume, a mere nothing, of no value really, but...

“What if I also threw in my *Romaunt of the Rose*, with annotations in the hand of Marguerite de Valois?”

“Let’s just drop the subject.”

“You know I’m not a rich man, but I’d gladly offer a thousand francs.”

“Forget it...”

“Well, fifteen hundred then.”

“Money matters shouldn’t come between friends.”

Concluding with:

“Well, I shall have the book at your death, when they sell off your estate.”

“At my death? But I’m younger than you are ...”

“That may be, but you have a wicked cough.”

“And what about your sciatica?”

“You can make it to eighty with sciatica.” (138)

XXI

At the start of the brief conclusion, titled “Reflections,” we have:

And then ...” (This is how Diderot began one of his stories, someone is bound to remind me.)

“Go on!”

“You have merely imitated Diderot.”

“Who had imitated Sterne ...”

“Who had imitated Swift ...”

“Who had imitated Rabelais ...”

“Who had imitated Merlinus Coccaius ...”

“Who had imitated Petronius ...”

“Who had imitated Lucian. And Lucian had imitated numerous others ...” (142)

But the humour isn't “literary” in the show-offy Nabokovian fashion, nor is it binary like that of *Candide*, in which a whole world-view is being shown up as ridiculous and all the incidents point in the same direction.

Angélique's life with La Corbinière has its ups as well as downs, and she goes on loving the jerk, and her memoirs aren't a polemic.

In a curious way, the humour seems to me psychological realism.

What is delicious, at least for me, is the glimpses of faux-reasonableness, whether in the doing or the saying—the fumbling logic on in the exchange with the police officer, those chandeliers (with the sack already bulging), the imagined husband (they're not at that point married) deliberately dressing his wife like that, and the sadly limited compass.

I am reminded of nothing so much as the realworld ponderings and self-presentations in the great early-talkies Laurel and Hardy shorts—the times when Ollie magisterially sweeps Stan aside and steps forward to negotiate (disastrously, of course) with the police officer or judge; the sublime moment when the two of them are sharing a bed and Ollie observes meditatively about his wife :

“She says I like you more than I do her.”

“Well, you do, don't you?”

“Yes” (still meditatively), “but let's not go into that.”

XXII

Angélique is more or less the first two-thirds of *The Salt-Smugglers*. The last third is devoted to the lively Abbé de Bucquoy, the narrator having now found the volume that he has been seeking.

After a bit, we're introduced into the Bastille, to which Bucquoy, who has already escaped from a prison at Vincennes, has been committed after an accidental involvement with salt bootleggers (salt being at that time heavily taxed).

What we have is a beautifully realistic forebear of lots of good prison-escape narratives—*La Grand Illusion*, *The Colditz Story*, *Billy Rags*, etc, with inmates feeling one another out as possible confederates, and piecing together equipment, and facing being moved from the cell where they need to be, and suffering betrayal by a fink who wants better conditions for himself, and working out the routines of sentries, and the rest of it.

There's enough understated unpleasantness too—the Hole (i.e. deepest dungeon) with its toads and rats and darkness, the abuse and death of a young woman prisoner, a reference to bullwhipping, the incarceration by the State for the smallest-seeming offences (a possibly satirical couplet)—to reinforce Sieburth's reminder in his Afterword that *Angélique* is seriously a political novel, especially concerning the sought control of speech.

Though Sieburth himself doesn't make the point in so many words, it strikes me that the strategies throughout for slipping things past the authorities while claiming, virtuously, to be scrupulously respecting the letter of the law, must have been familiar later to dissidents under a variety of authoritarian regimes.

Sieburth remarks that Nerval is “rarely read as a writer of worldliness.” (*Salt Smugglers*, 139).

I had assumed as much.

XXIII

Aurélie

Aurélie isn't funny at all. It's about Nerval's attacks of insanity, and was begun, it appears, as part of the process of recuperating from one of them.

It is remarkable, however, for his ability to recreate states of hallucination without the writing itself becoming crazy or his losing sight of the fact of his own self adrift in the Paris streets, often at night, and requiring to be rescued by concerned friends or the authorities, and helped by what seems to have been a remarkably non-invasive doctor at a time when French doctors were becoming monsters of self-importance.

Here (and it will be my only quotation) is an extended excerpt about one of his hospitalizations.

I initially imagined that the people gathered in this garden all exercised some influence over the stars and that the individual who kept ceaselessly turning in the same circle was thereby regulating the course of the sun. An elderly man, who was allowed out at certain hours of the day and who used to time himself with his watch as he tied knots, appeared to me to be in charge of monitoring the course of the hours. To myself I attributed an influence over the course of the moon, and I believed that having been struck by lightning by the Almighty, this star wore on its face the imprint of the mask I had previously noticed.

I ascribed a mysterious significance to the conversation of the guards and my companions. It seemed to me they represented all the races of the earth and that our task was to replot the course of the planets and to further expand their system. As I saw it, an error had crept into the overall combination of numbers and this was the root of all the ills of humanity. I further believed that the celestial spirits had taken on human form and that they were participants in this general assembly, even though they appeared to be busying themselves with mundane matters. My role, it seemed to me, was to re-establish universal harmony by cabbalistic arts and to discover a solution by summoning up the occult powers of the various religions.

In addition to the exercise area, we had a hall whose windows opened on to a horizon of foliage through their vertical bars. As I looked through these windows at the row of buildings outside, I saw their façades and windows take on the silhouette of countless pavilions, all decorated with arabesques and ridged with frets and spires, which reminded me of the imperial kiosks on the shores of the Bosphorous. This naturally turned my thoughts to Oriental matters. Around two o'clock, I was given a bath, thinking the attendants were valkyries, daughters of Odin, who wanted to raise me into immortality by gradually stripping my body of all its impurities.(305–306)

It is a remarkable work, and obviously one of the most interesting of those in which detailed visions and hallucinations figure.

The first of the two parts appeared in January 1855.

In February, in his forty-seventh year, Gérard de Nerval, born Gérard Labrunie, hanged himself one night from a grating in the narrow Rue de la Vieille Lanterne.

[The colours abruptly dimmed.]

XXIV

Yes, horrible.

He was, to use an old fashioned term, one of the purest spirits in what my Smattering has permitted me to know of French literature, and you can feel a protective affection for him.

In saying which, I am not contradicting what I said earlier about attributing an organic mind to a writer, and then referring everything back to it, with the disadvantage, if one is to be consistent, that until one knows everything about the writer and his works, one cannot say anything with certitude.

I am speaking of what one sees going on in the speech-acts of this text, and this, and this. And there is a question as to how to appraise what one sees, or thinks one sees there.

XXV

For that great American poet-critic Yvor Winters (1900–1967), author, among other things, of the three litCrit books assembled as *In Defense of Reason*, and the co-edited anthology *Quest for Reality*, the arc of Nerval's career, like that of his also suiciding friend the poet Hart Crane, would have been only an appalling warning about the perils of Romanticism.

I am going to disagree with him.

Nerval was indeed a Romantic, the first translator into French of Goethe's *Faust*, the transmitter of other aspect of German thought, the enthusiastic explorer of esoteric modes of knowledge, the disrupter of conventional barriers between fact and fiction, truth and lies, the explorer and celebrator (as was André Breton later) of a pre-Roman France, and a man increasingly incompetent at the business of everyday living.

He was also, it appears, intermittently a member of the so-called *Club des Haschischins*, the group of significant creators who, during the 1840s, met to engage in and discuss the drug experience in a house on the at that time bohemian Île de la Cité.

But, unless I've been reading carelessly or there has been a cover-up, he wasn't hopelessly in the grip of hash or alcohol. And he was extraordinarily productive in his writing, in contrast to sad little fin-de-siècle British figures like Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson. Baudelaire, in Sieburth's words, "observed that [Nerval] was one of the few authors of his age who had successfully managed, even in death, to remain 'forever lucid.'"

The image—aha, now I am coming to it— of his leading a lobster on a leash in—what was it?—the public gardens of the Palais-Royale, across the Rue de Rivoli from the Louvre, appears (if not intended ironically) to have been fictive, though reportedly at one point he kept in his room as a pet, presumably in a tank or bucket, a lobster he had saved from the boiling.

I am not myself into Crustaceanism. But for anyone who has watched blue-black lobsters crawling on the kitchen floor, it doesn't require research to show that a blue-green lobster out of its natural element is

not going to be trotting along a graveled path on its tiny legs like a terrier, but will simply be dragged along, gasping for oxygen.

I would like to believe, as I'm sure will you, that Nerval's natural kindness would have prevented that, particularly given his reported characterization of lobsters as "peaceful, serious creatures" who "know the secrets of the sea."

[Applause and a July the Fourth display of colours.]

Nor did he simply become and remain insane, like the greatest of German Romantic poets, Friedrich Hölderlin. He was right to maintain, even without the benefit of retroactive endorsement by Michel Foucault, that he wasn't a madman. Like Virginia Woolf he had episodes of insanity and was ontologically fragile, fatally so, but that's not the same thing.

XXVI

It seems to me arguable, too, that if he was the first of the heroic French Symbolist voyagers of the mind like Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Lautréamont, with the Surrealists after them, and capable, in some of the things that he did with language, of acting on the minds of others like Acid, he was also to some extent a warning for others in France as well as an inspiration, particularly when it came to questing after ultimate esoteric truths.

Baudelaire, while sympathetically acknowledging the hunger for vision and transcendence, brilliantly defined in the *Les Paradis Artificiels* (1860) the delusoriness of some of the claims being made on behalf of the drug experience, and observed, "Wine makes men happy and sociable, hashish isolates them. Wine exalts the will, hashish annihilates it."

Rimbaud quit cold turkey as a writer in favour of realworld action when he had gone as far as he could, or wanted to, in pursuit of the transcendent.

Lautréamont was already turning away from the "evil" fury of *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1868–69) when he died at the age of twenty-four, perhaps of "fever," during the 1870 Siege of Paris.

Mallarmé pulled back from the philosophical abyss that had yawned in front of him in his twenties.

And Breton went on working at finding ways of inhabiting the surreal without being destroyed thereby or needing drugs or booze to remain visionary.

The madness that overtook Artaud was the exception rather than the rule.

XXVII

Where the damage was really done was in America, where alcoholic suicides like the avant-garde poet and publisher Harry Crosby, and Hart Crane, in 1929 and 1932 respectively, and a number of subsequent figures who, in contrast to Rimbaud, had never gone through the discipline of a formal classical French education, were encouraged in their yearnings for the Ultimate by an Emersonian belief in the goodness of what one sincerely did and thought.

It was in that context that Winters' concern with reason—not to be confused with cool or sweet reasonableness and a readiness to compromise in the interests of social harmony—deserves to be seen. He himself, after all, as an adolescent, would jump into a nighttime canal to cool a body fevered by his reading, thereby contributing to the onset of the TB that would confine him for two years to a New Mexico sanitarium, and whose own writing in the Twenties was fragmented, modernist, and, yes, hungrily reaching towards the absolute and infinite.

XXVIII

Sieburth's restriction of the poems to the late ones seems to me an unwarranted attempt to increase Nerval's strangeness and downplay the features that relate him to, rather than differentiate him from, other poets.

His earlier poems are simply—poems. Nor, as I have said, is the neo-paganism of "Myrtho" particularly difficult.

Nerval's best poems, with their preference for forms from before the dominance of the neoclassical couplet and the garrulity that it permitted to non-dramatic poets, are noteworthy for their concision and control, and at times lyrical or meditative charm.

In a serious reading of several of the difficult later ones, a problem as with commentaries on Mallarmé, is not to so over-allegorize as to convert them into condensed prose statements, or to have all manner of biographical associations accumulate round them like weeds on the bottom of an old sailing vessel.

A test is always, it seems to me, what happens when you read a poem out aloud from start to finish without stopping along the way. Being able to flesh out in the mind's eye the term "le Pausillippe," which, cold on the page, can mean just about anything for the tyro, really matters.

But a one-line note equating a classical name with the name of an obscure woman in a poet's early life will simply, in itself, do nothing to firm up the poem as one reads. And it is insidiously easy to overlook the "How" of a poem, always the hardest thing to talk about, if one concentrates on the "What."

Nor are these poems simply the versified moans of a victim.

"El Desdichado" is in fact, in its decisiveness, chivalric allusions, and Orphic analogies, a curiously heroic work, befitting, perhaps, the son of someone who had been a doctor in Napoleon's Grande Armée. The opening announcement, after the title's evocation of Scott's *Ivanhoe*, has something in it of the knight entering the tourney and proclaiming who he is and what his heraldic device signifies. And, descending like Orpheus into the Underworld, the "I" of the poem has kept on singing and been twice victorious, an allusion perhaps to surviving bouts of insanity.

Nerval's life had indeed, in ways vastly different from that stuff about the lobster, been a heroic one, and there is an extraordinary poignancy to his terminating it after the achievements of those packed final five years.

[Applause. Tentacles. Lightshow.]

2009–2014

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VII

Intellection and Honour

Playing the Game (1988)

A talk delivered to the Department of English and Philosophy, United States Military Academy, West Point, in 1988

I

I want to consider briefly here certain aspects of the idea of honor.

Obviously I am now at one of the prime centers where the concept is embodied; where it is *lived*. I feel privileged to be here, and anything that I have to say on this matter is likely to fall under the heading of carrying coals to Newcastle, or teaching one's grandmother to suck eggs.

But when one respects certain values, one likes to think (at least I do) that they can hold up under more or less "advanced" intellectual critiques—particularly if one feels the pressure of Kant's dictum, "So act that you can will that your maxim could become a universal law, regardless of the end." ¹

I'm particularly interested here in the bearing of chivalric values on intellectual-academic ones.

II

I was recently reading for the first time some selections from Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (ca. 1810) and came upon the following intriguing passage:

Since Christianity was not satisfied with certain external acts, as was the polytheism of the ancient world, but involved the whole inner man with his slightest impulses, the feeling of moral independence sought refuge in the sphere of honor; equivalent to a worldly moral philosophy next to the religious one, which often asserted itself in contradiction to the latter but nevertheless was still related to it to the extent that it never calculated the consequences, rather unconditionally sanctioned principles of action as dogma exalted above all examination by carping criticism. ²

It is an interesting formulation—a zone of freedom and value independent of a totalizing intellectual system, and whose values cannot be simply subsumed under one. The honor-governed self can say, in a *principled* fashion, “This is *me*, these are *my* values, stay out of my head. Thus far and no further.”

I was reminded of the splendid oath of fealty of the Aragonese nobles: “We who are as good as you swear to you, who are no better than we, to accept you as our King and sovereign lord, provided you observe all our estates and laws; and if not, no.”³

I like the idea of that kind of free space, and that vision of power relationships.

III

But of course there’s been a good deal of “carping criticism” over the centuries with respect to chivalric values.

Honor, in conventional Christian terms, makes for violence and disorder, except when brought into line with Church-approved violences, as in the Crusades and subsequent holy wars. (Holy wars have been in general the *least* chivalrous of wars. In *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche calls priests “the *most evil enemies*”.)⁴

In more rationalistic terms, honor puts one out of touch with the real world, locks one into rigid postures, makes one persist in untenable courses because of one’s obsession with one’s image.

And it looks especially outmoded when viewed through post-modernist eyes, alert to fictions and masks, and intent on the *real* power struggles that they conceal.

IV

In a recent article, a spokesman for Deconstructionism argues that deconstructing a text is “a symbolic action which endorses the free integration in open and equal congress of all persons. Deconstructors are, in at least one of their major tendencies, radical egalitarians, radical democrats.”

And he discerns in Derrida, and the Derridean idea of free-play, a Utopian yearning after a carnivalesque dance of fully liberated energies.

“Derrida’s Romantic Wager,” as he tells us, “is that this full unbinding will energize without debasing us, or, as one contemporary Romantic writer [Norman Mailer] puts it, ‘that man would prove to be more creative than murderous and so would not destroy himself’.”⁵

V

Viewed from such a perspective, lines that one refuses to cross or allow others to cross, and rules which cannot be broken are, of course, deeply divisive. They also involve archaic ideas of more or less permanent selves.

There is a large difference between the “self” that is simply a point of intersection of multiple codes that operate willy-nilly and exist to be “read,” and the self that is *conscious* of certain codes and principles and endeavors to live by them—is *bound* by them.

Such as the hero of one of Donald Hamilton’s excellent Westerns who remarks, “I have no deaths on my conscience. Yet the fact is that there are some things one cannot allow to be done to oneself, civilization or no civilization, without resistance or retaliation of some kind—not without losing part of one’s manhood; not without feeling ashamed and incomplete for the rest of one’s life”.⁶

VI

And the idea of honor has been remarkably durable, popping up in unexpected places, such as the exchange in Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* between Old Bolshevik Rubashov and the White Russian officer in the next cell:

No. 402 tapped quickly and precisely [on the wall] : HONOUR IS TO LIVE AND DIE FOR ONE’S BELIEF.

Rubashov answered just as quickly: HONOUR IS TO BE USEFUL WITHOUT VANITY.⁷

I am interested in how well the idea stands up with respect to the game-rules that we play under as academics. Are we, in our concern with truth and our sense of the heinousness, the *dishonorableness*, of lying, falsification, plagiarism, a bit archaic, a bit—or more than a bit—*unphilosophical*?

VII

A writer I find particularly reassuring here, and shall principally focus on, is Borges, in so many ways the grand master of post-modernist games and game-moves, the creator of such disquieting fictions as the minor Symbolist poet Pierre Menard, engaged in writing in the early twentieth-century a *Don Quixote* that would be word for word the same as Cervantes' novel of that name but a *different* work, and more interesting.

Borges, who had distinguished soldiers on both sides of his family, was fascinated all his life with frontier life and chivalric men—soldiers, gauchos, knife-fighting toughs. He was fascinated with courage, with integrity, with commitment—and with their converse, cowardice. Of one of his stories he said later that it was “one I have been retelling, with small variations, ever since. It is the tale of the motiveless, or disinterested duel—of courage for its own sake.”⁸

And he wrote memorably of Lord-Jim-like breaks and self-betraysals, and of the possibility of second chances, circling around the problematic notion that “Any life, no matter how long or complex it may be, is made up essentially of *a single moment*—the moment in which a man finds out, once and for all, who he is.”⁹

VIII

In Borges, as in writers like Conrad and Stephen Crane, one feels the allure of the ideal described in a memorable passage in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*:

What is it that, even to the savage, is the object of the greatest admiration? It is a man who is undaunted, who knows no fear, and who therefore does not give way to danger, but sets manfully to work with full deliberation. Even when civilization has reached a

high pitch there remains this special reverence for the soldier; only that there is then further required of him that he should also exhibit all the virtues of peace ... ¹⁰

But what is involved, in Borgesian terms (terms that may also be ours), in the idea of honourable integrity? And why should a highly civilized, a highly *literary*, writer have been fascinated for so many years by the idea of the duel, especially the Argentine duel with knives?

IX

What we have in the duel, I suggest, is an example of the recurring turn-of-the-century idea of the epitomizing moment, the moment in which, as when Sydney Carton mounts the scaffold in *A Tale of Two Cities*, or when Captain Oates walks out into the Antarctic night during Scott's ill-fated expedition, we see, in Yeats's words, "Character isolated by a deed/ To engross the present and dominate memory ..." ¹¹ And the duel is a deed requiring an especially focused and concentrated commitment, above all, the duel with knives.

In a knife-fight, such as the unforgettable one between Pruitt and Fatso in James Jones' *From Here to Eternity*, it is imperative not to pull back once one has committed oneself to the final thrust. And preceding the physical commitment of the body, such as when one of Borges' gauchos accepts the loss of a hand in order to win a fight, there must be a deeper commitment in which the mind overrides the fears and protests of the body.

In these respects, the duel is a practical demonstration of the narrator's advice in Borges' story "The Garden of Forking Paths"—"Whosoever would undertake some atrocious enterprise should act as if it were already successful, should impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past." ¹²

X

Moreover, commitment in Borges has its philosophical aspects.

Borges' fascination with the Kabbalah is well known and figures prominently in a number of his stories. But he was also interested in a

very different kind of Jewish intellection, namely that of Spinoza, and he several times singles out for mention Spinoza's central concept of the *conatus*, the idea, as Borges puts it, that "all things try to keep on being themselves; a stone wants to be a stone, and the tiger a tiger." ¹³

There is a good deal in Borges about self-realization—about the coming of things to fullness. But what is being celebrated is not mere self-assertion and the domination of others—an activity in which anything goes, and in which (since after all what one is trying to do is *win*), one is free to change the rules as one goes along. ("Heads I win, tails you lose.")

For all his interest in fictions and fiction-making, Borges constantly returns to the coercive reality of the physical world, especially the reality of the body, and to the fact that thought ineluctably has consequences in that world. It is not a world in which anything goes because nothing can be known for certain.

XI

Borges was indeed strongly conscious that there can be no ultimately certain, no *final* knowledge. In some of his best-known fables, such as "The Library of Babel," with its indefatigable questers for the one magical text whose rightness would immediately disclose itself, and in relation to which all the others would fall into place, he memorably defines the dangers of lusting after a Platonic certitude.

But texts and signs can nevertheless be read correctly or incorrectly in relation to specific situations (Borges loved and wrote detective fiction), and misreadings in this world of the flesh can have disastrous consequences. When in "Death and the Compass" Detective Lönnrot elaborately misconstrues the clues planted by the Buenos Aires gangster Dandy Red Scharlach, it results in his death at the latter's hands.

Fiction-making can shape reality in other ways, too.

In the story "Theme of the Traitor and Hero," 19th-century Irish Republicans put into effect an elaborately literary scenario in order to preserve, for the sake of their cause, a leader who has betrayed them, a scenario in which, like Rubashov in *Darkness at Noon*, he himself

agrees to play the part written for him, and goes to his death at an assassin's hand.

And in "The Maker," the fictions created by Homer after blindness has compelled him to give up the warrior life go on to influence the lives of uncounted hearers and readers, including other warriors.

XII

In other words, the codes in which Borges deals include not only ciphers to be cracked or mysteries to be solved (what is the *real* story of this man-made labyrinth in which someone died?), but codes of conduct, including the conduct both of honor-bound men of violent action and of writers, artists, and intellectuals.

And honor, a sense of worth, comes for Borges from playing within the rules of whatever game one has chosen to enter, a game of difficulties overcome and closures achieved, whether in the fighting of an honorable duel—a duel in which the combatants are more or less evenly matched—or the completion of a significant work of art. The rules cannot simply be altered as one goes along. The games of honor are games in which *failure* is possible.

In the story "The Form of the Sword," the ironical intellectual Moon who, during the fighting against the Black-and-Tans during the Sinn Fein rebellion of 1919–21, betrays his comrade-in-arms, is overwhelmed by self-disgust—by a sense of the heinousness of his deed as seen through honorable eyes. And subsequently, during his long self-imposed purgatory in South America, he succeeds in redeeming himself (at least in the eyes of the narrator) by internalizing some of the values of honor as he labours back-breakingly, and with no-one to confide in, in his lonely *hacienda*.

XIII

It is significant, moreover, that Moon *does* work in solitude, just as Pierre Menard, playing rigorously by his own crazy rules with respect to the *Don Quixote* undertaking, works in solitude.

Borges' stories are not success stories but *difficulty* stories. His characters do things because they feel them to be *worth* doing, and not because they are seeking, and governed by, the immediate approval of others. His Czech man of letters Jaromir Hladik, granted by a miracle the opportunity to finish his projected masterpiece in his head while facing a Nazi firing squad, labours on at the enterprise and brings it to completion, even though no-one else is ever going to be aware of the fact.

And if Borges' gauchos, soldiers, outlaws, and slum toughs inhabit subcultures permeated by tales of valour, it is obvious that the deeds of valour that they themselves perform are ones that they see as good in themselves, and not just good because they are *theirs*. They would admire them just as much if they were performed by others.

XIV

So it isn't really paradoxical that towards the end of his life Borges told an interviewer that he wanted to devote what remained of his time to studying the Old Norse sagas—and Spinoza.

As I said, Borges was well aware of the temptation of the idea of a privileged, a *final* accession to truth. Each of his numerous parties of searchers in the Library of Babel is convinced that it is about to enter into possession of *the* truth—that Truth is hovering just a little out of reach. But there is something comic and contemptible about this yearning for a quick fix, a sudden totalizing insight that will guarantee one's own superiority. And as Borges also points out, the sensed existence of that final truth undercuts and devalues the merely provisional and transitory here-and-now—at times virtually annihilates it, draining away all its worth.

It is a very different kind of relationship to knowledge that one meets in Spinoza. Spinoza's *Ethics* is one of the most sublime examples of honorable intellection—the heroic labours of a solitary reasoner concerned to work out in the most scrupulous and inspectable terms, with the possibility of identifiable error displaying itself at every point in his chain of argument and irreparably breaking it—an argument with the highest and most formidable of adversaries.

XV

The Borgesian cluster of attitudes that I've described seems to me a sounder form of post-modernism than the one that I spoke of earlier. It is pluralist. It acknowledges that one can never escape from the striving for power. And it honors reason and rational argument.

XVI

We are all familiar by now with how totalitarianism, with its certainty that it is in possession of The Truth, devalues the idea of reason and makes it simply, as in *Darkness at Noon*, a mode of manipulation and entrapment, a mere rhetorical device for controlling the behavior of others whose own arguments, one knows in advance, cannot have any weight because their premises are politically incorrect.

A devaluing of reason seems to me also implicit in the ostensibly ultra-democratic Deconstructionist enterprise as described by the critic I quoted.

Nor, despite the putative vision of an Edenic plenitude and a maximizing of the pleasure principle, is it a benign devaluing. The infant, that paradigm of the pleasure principle in full cry, does not simply desire gratification, it desires *dominance*—total gratification on demand, a total subservience by others.

Deconstructionism seems to me a dominative enterprise, all the more so when its practitioners can (like Rubashov's implacable interrogator and unmasker Gletkin) take as axiomatic the political correctness of their own ends.

And in a world in which one is endlessly unmasking the concealed power plays of others, it indeed makes emotional sense to say—whenever one sees a chance of getting away with it—“Heads I win, tails you lose”—and to feel no sense of shame when one is caught doing so.

Hemingway remarked that Gertrude Stein “had discovered a way of writing she could do and be happy every day. She could never fail; nor strike out; nor be knocked out of the box because she made the rules and played under her own rules.”¹⁴

XVII

Truly reasonable argument, on the other hand, takes us back to something very like the ground of the duel.

What counts is what goes on in *this* discussion, with *this* colleague or *that* student.

One cannot, or at least shouldn't, appeal to "authority" (to this or that eminent critic or philosopher as if that *settled* anything—"Leavis says ...," "Wittgenstein says ...". Nor can one pass from quantity to quality. A legion of academics may praise a work and that work can still be bad.

And honorable argument is rule-governed. It's not just free-play, a struggle of competing egos in which one is entitled to do anything that one can get away with. Entailed in genuine arguing, as in honor-governed physical action, is risk-taking and the possibility of *losing*—of having to acknowledge that one's assumptions were wrong or one's arguments inconsistent with each other. It also involves a commitment to the idea of objective truth.

One of the interesting things about *Darkness at Noon* is how during his interrogation by Gletkin, Rubashov struggles at times to break through the rhetorical meshes and invoke what *really* happened (there are lies that he can *not* bring himself to assent to), and feels an absurd but honorable satisfaction when at one point, after a night of exhausting argument, he obliges Gletkin to withdraw a minor charge against him.

XVIII

Furthermore, the patterns of honor carry over into our debates as academics at Department and Faculty meetings.

When the rules are right and are scrupulously observed, such meetings can be models of what highly-structured and non-authoritarian power relationships can be like.

No-one can say with coercive force, "We *must* do such and such because I *know* it is the right thing," or, "We must do it because someone somewhere has *proved* it is the right thing," or, "We must do

it because they do it elsewhere.” As in a duel, or battle, it is the here and now of *this* space, this ground, that matters. It is a free space. In the end, what counts, with respect to a specific motion or amendment, is a vote freely taken, in which each person’s voice or raised hand has the same value, and in which everyone has the right to say No.

And as a debate, with its motions, counter-motions, and amendments proceeds, one may find oneself having to respond at high speed to the unpredictable.

Thinking well on one’s feet when disagreements are strong demands a focusing of the self, an alertness to the possible consequences if this or that measure passes or fails, and a prior anticipating (as one prepares for the meeting) of what participants are likely to say and feel and do.

And when parties are more or less evenly balanced, there can be a special drama to the moment of a vote, that moment in which one has to say Aye (or refrain from saying it) in ignorance at that moment of who else is saying it or how many people will say Nay.

What one does at the moment of decision can have consequences, sometimes major consequences, for the flesh-and-blood lives of persons in one’s institution. One is incarnating one future, or preventing another from coming into being.

XIX

“The purpose of the duel,” observes one of Donald Hamilton’s characters of the rule-governed duel with flint-lock pistols, “is to bring two men together on relatively equal terms; it’s supposed to be a test of courage, not of skill. Even an indifferent marksman, like myself, can hit a man-sized target at twenty yards if his hand doesn’t tremble too violently.”¹⁵

The courage of honor, it seems to me, involves a whole stance in relation to the world. In the moments of legislative decision, the Kantian concern with principled choosing and the chivalric concern with the honorable act—one not dictated by one’s desire for praise or one’s fear of others’ anger, but by one’s sense of what is right—come together in a single focus.

I take particular pleasure in the thought that the presiding spirit on such academic occasions, concerned with minimizing mere power, maximizing a respect for the rights of others, and allowing the fullest room for the individual conscience, is that of Major-General Henry M. Robert, the deviser of *Robert's Rules of Order*.

Notes

1. Immanuel Kant, *On History*, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Ernst Behler, fore. René Wellek, The German Library, vol. 13 (NY, Continuum, 1986), p. 302.
2. August Wilhelm Schlegel, from *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literatur*, in *German Romantic Criticism*, ed. A. Leslie Wilson, fore. Ernst Behler, The German Library, vol. 21 (NY, Continuum, 1982), pp. 182–3.
3. Quoted in Montagu, Lord of Beaulieu, *More Equal than Others: The Changing Fortunes of the British and European Aristocracies*, fore. Sir Iain Moncreiffe of That Ilk (NY, St. Martin's Press, 1970), p. 61.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Collingdale (NY, Vintage, 1969), p. 33.
5. To judge from the high page numbers on the MS, 633, 634, these quotations come from a fat anthology. But they do not appear to be in my copy of Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle's *Critical Theory since 1965* (1986), and I am baffled as to where else they might be.
6. Donald Hamilton, *The Two-Shoot Gun* (Greenwich, Conn., Fawcett Gold Medal, 1960), pp. 120–121.
7. Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*, trans. Daphne Hardy, Danube Edition (London, Hutchinson, 1973), p. 169.
8. Jorge Luis Borges, "An Autobiographical Essay," *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933–1969*, ed. and trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni, in collaboration with the author (NY, Dutton, 1970), p. 232.

9. Borges, "The Life of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz (1829–1874)," *Aleph*, p. 83.
10. Kant, *Philosophical Writings*, p. 219.
11. W.B. Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion."
12. Borges, *Ficciones*, ed. and introd, Anthony Kerrigan (NY, Grove, 1962), pp. 92–93.
13. Borges, "Borges and Myself," *Aleph*, p. 99.
14. Ernest Hemingway, *Selected Letters, 1917–1961*, ed. Carlos Baker (NY, Scribner, 1961), p. 650.
15. Donald Hamilton, *The Big Country* (NY, Dell, 1971), p. 150.

VIII

In Front of the Door **Thought, Truth, Action (2014)**

Notes towards an article about preserving one's balance and staying focussed in a world a-clatter with "information," neither lulled by talk about "inevitable" progress, nor scared by talk about prodigious changes, nor inhibited by talk about the inability of language to provide a secure basis for action.

Portal

I

The door is antique, massive, filling the screen. A bare arm slowly reaches in and raises the heavy knocker.

Close-up.

The knocker is a bearded figure with an arrow in its bare chest, holding a limp female form.

The credits roll.

We are entering the ambiguously titled *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932).

II

The captain of the steam yacht is uneasy. These tropical waters are dangerous, the marking lights a bit out of place. He would rather go around the channel. Don't worry, says the American owner, just go on through. He and his four pals in the saloon resume their conversation over drinks.

The yacht hits a reef, the deck tilts, the lights go out, the boilers burst, the stokers die screaming, the yacht sinks, sharks circle, there is only dark sea, and amiable big-game hunter Joel McCrea, and the desperate skipper clutching a piece of floating wreckage and snatched away by a shark.

McCrea strikes out for the shore, evades the sharks, collapses on the beach, sleeps, wakes, pushes inland through tropical vegetation, arrives at the door. Which slowly opens to his knock.

Inside is a baronial hall with civilized comforts, a welcoming aristocratic host in evening attire, clean clothes, drinks, a couple of other shipwreck survivors.

There are oddities—a sinister mute Cossack servant, a sadistic tapestry, a whispered caution from his fellow guest Fay Wray, a peculiar intensity in his host's conversation about hunting.

McCrea isn't bothered, though, when told that he'll have to stay for a few days until the launch is fixed. He's through his survival portal. He and his host are fellow gentlemen-hunters. He can relax.

III

But this is just the start of the game. In a few hours, he and Wray, with only a hunting knife between them, and the Count's horrifying trophy room in their heads, will be out on the island trying to outwit the stalking Count and his hounds in the silvery jungle.

Welcome to 1932.

Culture-arcs

The eighth volume of the Oxford History is 1870–1930, and when you look back across the centuries to the fifteen-hundreds (at least), you can see the New starting up around the middle of a century, and the momentum building, and reaching a kind of terminus thirty or so years into the next one.

I have no explanation for this.

2000 AD

Despite the symbolism of the big two-oh-oh-oh, we didn't step through that portal into a brave new century with new rules. We are still coming to terms with developments that began in the Sixties, especially the sought maximizing of individual and group freedoms.

Empowerment

In *Major Barbara* (1905), Shaw's Undershaft quotes the faith of the armaments-manufacturer: to sell arms to all comers if they have the cash.

Technology is neutral, and indifferent to ideology. It empowers progressives. It also empowers their implacable enemies.

Inevitability?

McLuhan's irresistible Media?

Science's irresistible Reason?

H.G. Wells' irresistible World Government ?

The withering away of irreconcilable ideologies?

The Internet of Things connecting everything up with everything else in a seamless harmony?

The Lion lying down with the Lamb and eating grass?

"Oh, Jake," Brett said, "we could have had such a damned good time together." ...

"Yes," I said, "Isn't it pretty to think so?"

The Sun Also Rises

Realworld

While you are in Realworld, whether SF, or fantasy, or historical romance, or naturalism, or others, you know that actions have consequences and that those consequences can be terrible, and you *feel* them.

The pitiless butchering of Lord Weary's wife and child by the mason and, egging him on, the "false nurse" in the ballad "Lamkin" is grand-guignol. But the final stanzas draw you into their own fates.

O sweetly sang the black-bird
That sat upon the tree;

But sairer grat Lamkin,
When he was condemned to die.

And bonny sang the mavis,
Out o the thorny brake;
But sairer grat the nourice,
When she was tied to the stake.

“grat”>“wept” The universal protest of childhood.

Something doesn't have to keep on happening. One simply needs to know that it *can* happen.

Realer world

We now know that the Web is not a benign globe-enclosing cocoon, indestructible, existing independently of mere individuals from here to eternity, smoothly gliding like the Ptolemaic spheres, and served by a visionary priesthood of Techies.

It's a site of frightening potentials—the real surface of the sun, not that smoothly glowing disk. A few guys with box cutters and sacred texts brought down the Wall Street towers and made the Pentagon pensive. A teenage superhacker could devastate an economy.

And there is no more reason to kowtow to the merchants at Apple than to those at Volkswagen.

Prophesying

H.G. Wells, that virtual inventor of the twentieth century laid waste cities in *The War in the Air* (1910) and dropped atomic bombs on Paris and other capitals in *The World Set Free* (early 1914) After which, Reason took over and the exhausted world became governed by benign apolitical experts in a scientific Shangri-la in Switzerland.

He failed to spot the long terrible Westfront trance of trench warfare that would soon be starting.

Bathtub

Decades ago, the brilliant mathematician and polymath John von Neumann, looking at the physical world around him, used the analogy

of a bathtub filling exponentially, doubling at each stage, with less and less time in which to turn off the taps.

“Reason”

In Wells’ “The Land-Ironclads” (1903), young techies in large tanks, “something between a big blockhouse and a giant’s dish-cover,” sat in front of camera-obscura screens moving pointers, pressing buttons, and wrecking a conventional attack in a few hours.

For Wells, this was Reason, in conflict with an unreason for which he had no time. You saw the truth, you put it into practice. What he didn’t understand was the workings of the actual human mind-sets out there.

He died bitter. In “The Country of the Blind” (1904), being sighted among the members of a community blind from birth in their high Andean valley didn’t bring power. Nor had becoming invisible. Doctor Moreau had been unable to burn out the “animal” in his House of Pain. The Martians’ technology was superior to ours, and they *ate* us.

A century later, though, there were scaled down electronic tanks like his.

Consequences

In Realworld, it takes time to see to see the consequences of ideas as they become flesh-and-blood. No, our primate nature isn’t infinitely malleable and self-defining.

Progress

“Progress” does not consist of discarding the old. It consists of coping with new circumstances with an understanding of what is still alive in the old. The speed-up of information and retrieval makes it easier to see what has worked and what could go wrong. If one want to know.

Practicals

In that big hokey star-studded movie *A Bridge Too Far* about the gallant failure to capture the bridge at Arnhem, a British column of tanks stops a few miles away from where the paratroopers are hanging on.

A pragmatic Yank is furious with the Brit in charge. Were they stopping for a nice cuppa? Didn't they know their buddies were fighting in there? The Brit stiffly says, sorry old man, we have our orders.

Those Brits!

But what the movie's makers, with their thumbs on the Yankee side of the scales, didn't say was that tanks unaccompanied by infantry to clear the woods on either side of the road were sitting ducks for anti-tank weapons.

Emblems

9/11. *Jurassic Park*.

Our *Titanics*.

Consolidation

Avant-gardes, spearheads—thrilling! But so are catch-ups thanks to technology.

The past becomes more and more present on the Box, the Great War more and more a monstrous insanity in natural colour, with many faces and places and realworld activities, and not just a silent black-and-white charade of drab-costumed figures moving around jerkily on cardboard sets. And older civilizations are restored to three-dimensional life.

And new technologies take us deeper into the animal kingdoms where it's *not* all tooth-and-claw and *vae victis*.

“Animality”

There had been such projections earlier of human characteristics onto “savage” nature in order to justify Mankind's own predations—wolves, gorillas, cephalopods, rhinos, sharks.

Mankind—the hunter and killer for pleasure. The *cruel* animal!

But lovely *animal* nurturings and collaboratings—orangutans, elephants, whales, pick your favorites.

With lessons there about power, and the limiting of violence, and no, human nature is *not* infinitely malleable and self-defining, and no, you can't maximize freedoms and minimize obligations without conflicts between claimed rights that take on a tooth-and-claw intensity when resources are finite.

Looking

To see, one has to look—to *want* to look, look precisely, *embed* oneself. To *grasp* things.

The machines won't do it for you.

Photography

Dorothea Lange, out on the dusty 1930s roads, showed *precisely* what these statistical migrant families were like. These were not “losers” who deserved to lose. Her iconic weary mother, seen precisely in close up, hand to chin, with the two tow-headed kids, became representative of many others. *That* photo, not the others of her that you can see online.

Lange herself, as a WPA photographer, had become a fuller self as she entered officially into the lives of those individuals, respecting them and their values, and winning their confidence. The mother has obviously stopped talking and is pondering.

Lange had had to be in close with that kind of lens.

Plenitude

Walker Evans went back behind the brilliant modernism of Man Ray to the plain photography of Eugène Atget, Lewis Hine, Jacob Riis, creating a new synthesis from which other photographers have gone on learning. A true modernity, not drawing attention to its own cleverness.

Photography and poetry, two modes in which a high degree of focussing is possible.

And plenitude—Pound's “Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.” Three-dimensional. Shaped.

Good literature, too. Embodiment. Enactment.

Action

W.H. Auden said, “Poetry makes nothing happen” (“In Memory of W.B. Yeats.”)

No, dearie, poetry *can* make things happen. The folksong movement helped to bring down a President and end a war. Behind Bob and Joan and the rest were Pete Seeger and the Weavers, and behind them Pete and the Almanac Singers, and behind *them* Woody Guthrie, and behind them all, the Wobblies, thirty-six editions of whose *Little Red Song Book* were published between 1908 and 1995.

Those were songs that all could sing, with meaning-charged rhyming lyrics and expressive melodies, equivalents of the expressive faces in movies and marvellous Renaissance paintings like Cranach’s.

Plus lots of realworld action and a healthy contempt for the bosses, and their goons, and their bought politicians.

Singing helped to clean up the polluted Hudson. Right now the two-part documentary *Saving My Tomorrow* (2014) gives us kids singing *felt* songs of ecological protest that they’ve composed themselves, no doubt sending some of the tough-not-tender guardians of economic reality into paroxysms of indignation about brainwashing.

Pete lives. And Peggy sings on. And thanks to whatever gods there be (you think there’s just one?) for Bill Maher, though I don’t recall a single chirrup from him.

We know from the decades-long cartooning of Herblock that what tells is ridicule and, even more, fact-related scorn.

How about “The Ballad of President Palin,” “The Ballad of Great Big Boots on the Ground,” “The Ballad of the Coke Boys,” “The Ballad of the Six-Day Creation,” “The Ballad of the Mad Haters’ Tea Party,” “The Ballad of Gerry Mandering,” “The Love Song of AK-47”?

Politics

Yeats was not a political poet the way Hitchcock was a maker of thrillers. He did not go to politics in search of subjects for poems. Like Hardy, he barely touched on the Great War.

He had beliefs that took him in odd directions away from Positivism, and did a lot of talking about himself thinking about how he felt about love.

But realworld was there for him, and at times political poems burst from him, not a lot when you make a count, but charged with unforgettable energy and defining our sense of him. “Robert Emmett and Wolfe Tone,/All that delirium of the brave,” “Oh but we talked at large before/ The sixteen men were shot.” And it wasn’t versified messaging. He was questioning even there. “Easter 1916,” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” and “The Second Coming” were major ponderings and interrogatings.

As would be, later, Auden’s “September 1, 1939” and, with lots of research obviously in back of them, Helen Pinkerton’s great series of poems about the American Civil War.

Yeats gave young Ireland its international voice.

A poetics nowadays that had a sign on the door reading No Nasties would be pretty odd.

The Figurative

The figurative is the natural in language. The literal, most obviously in science, is a subset.

The figurative is an affair of compressions and speed-ups. You say, “I’ll look into the matter,” rather than promise to conduct an investigation. Figures of speech reach ahead as preliminary organizers. Did “family resemblances” fall on Wittgenstein’s head like Newton’s apple? It has certainly been taken into a great many other heads since.

The Terminator wouldn’t understand the moves that I’ve just made.

The figurative is the most democratic, since the physical is the immediate or instinctive mode of speech by the greatest number of

people. “Go fuck yourself.” “A pain in the ass.” “On a high.” The concrete is the mode in which giving concrete examples is the method of defining celebrated by Pound in his account of the Chinese written character.

The concrete doesn’t have to be choc-a-bloc with the physical. It can also be a matter of the slowing down and speeding up and stressings of expressive speech phrasing.

In my North London kindergarten in the Thirties, a new teacher insisted that we not speak of going up or down the road. The road was flat. We should say “along the road”.

When I told my father, he exclaimed, “The woman’s a fool.”

Or was it “a pedant”?

“Arrogance”

For awhile there was a curious American-intellectual pattern with respect to action. I am thinking of the critical dissing of figures like Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*, Henry Fleming in *The Red Badge of Courage*, and the governess in “The Turn of the Screw,” who are accused of pride and blindness when they act decisively, with the implication that they haven’t understood the real facts of the situations in which they find themselves, or their own motives.

Ah, Irony!

The recoil from commitment could be traced back to the House Un-American Activities Committee and the McCarthy inquisitions, and the tangle of left-wing actions engaged in, or summoned to, in the Thirties and wartime Forties, as in “Which side are you on?”

Given the ironies of those Stalinist years as encapsulated in Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (1940) and the soul-searching in Lionel Trilling’s *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), the notion of objective political truth seemed shaky, particularly if one was required to invoke it in the face of right-wing bullying.

Modernism

The modernism in poetry and fiction that Pound promoted, including Flaubert, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Corbière, Joyce was a realworld solidifying, not a dismantling and disintegrating.

But language, as he said, could also become rotten, particularly when the Romantic desire to see the Poet as a seer revealing transcendent truths collided with the possibility that one could never pass beyond appearances to the *Ding an Sich*, the Thing-in-Itself.

Truth

“What were they going to do with the Grail when they found it, Mr. Rossetti?”

In a Max Beerbohm cartoon, a squat clean-shaven Benjamin Jowett in black clerical garb, Master of Balliol College, translator of the complete works of Plato, and creator of a cadre of high-level public administrators with first-class degrees, is addressing the large, bearded Dante Gabriel Rossetti, at work on a set of Arthurian frescoes in the debating chamber of the student Union.

The question could also be asked of *the* Truth, or just Truth, dammit, Truth, Truth, TRUTH.

It seems a curious obsession, a higher-level hunt for Bigfoot, which never succeeds despite all the hunters and searchers and equipment, but furnishes shadowy ambiguous glimpses of Something, and makes the woods exciting, and generates employment among the locals, and gives a lot of people an aim in life, which would be lost if the quest succeeded and a whole lot of common-or-garden primate families were discovered and the ethologists moved in with recording equipment that actually worked.

Ditto Nessie and the evident assumption (absent Mom and Dad and Sis and Gramps) that if something is very big it can live very very long.

Literal

Many statements of fact are incomplete or untrue or both. Like my saying that I weigh 233 pounds. If I wanted to edge nearer to veracity I

would have to say that when I weighed myself for the past three days on my new bathroom scales after getting up, that is what they registered, as did my old one. But the scales could be inaccurate, or my aging eyes could be playing tricks on me.

In fact, though, I wouldn't need to make that fuller statement, because anyone for whom the original statement was intended would know that people weigh themselves at home, or at the drugstore, or are weighed by the doctor, and the result is perfectly adequate as an indicator of bodily health and whether the pounds are coming or going.

No-one says, "But what *exactly* is your weight?" unless you're a jockey or an astronaut in training. Why would they want to know?

If I said, "A bird was trapped in my garage last night," the statement would be, formally, as generic as my opening one about the Martian in front of the door. But my listeners, knowing where I was located, and what the time of year was, would be unlikely to wonder whether I meant a pelican, or a bald eagle, or a pheasant, or a raven, or a hummingbird, the likelihood being that if it was an unusual bird I would have named it.

When I was nine and we were out in a hired rowboat off Jane Austen's Lyme Regis, I mentioned De Luxe toffees to my father, the kind that came in large red tins with the name blazoned across the top. He exploded, "Don't they teach you anything at that school of yours?" I'd said "Di Lucks."

His own careful French was, I'm sure, impeccably pronounced. But "Duh Lewks" toffees were not what people asked for in London sweetshops.

The unfairness of it still rankles.

Meaning

The sound "Luv" doesn't carry a hyper-meaning beyond our imaginings, the *true* meaning of the word. It contains, potentially, all the contexts in which it is used or misused, including Hallmark.

In a playful poem by Auden beginning "Some say that love's a little boy," a stanza goes,

Does it look like a pair of pyjamas
Or the ham in a temperance hotel,
Does its odour remind you of llamas
Or has it a comforting smell?
Is it prickly to touch as a hedge is
Or soft as eiderdown fluff,
Is it sharp or quite smooth at the edges?
O tell me the truth about love.

And what would one feel, what would one *do* if a veil were lifted and one saw what that sparrow in the garage was *really* like?—not a gorgeous bird-of-all-Platonic-birds but a crumble of atoms, or an uncrackable code, or a screeching demon trying to break through into our dimension?

Borges

In his story “The Library of Babel” (1941) enquirers trudge in vain through identical hexagonal rooms in search of the book that will lead them (they think) to the book that will lead them to the book that will lead them (keep going) to The Book that contains ultimate truths. But his fables, nevertheless, are full of the differences between true and false narratives.

Borges, that lover of detective stories, was not a fan of mystification, any more than was his admired, G.K. Chesterton, whose *shtick* in his Father Brown stories was to begin with what seemed to be an uncanny supernatural occurrence, and then show the normal human means by which it was brought about.

In his “Death and the Compass,” Detective Lönrot, having solved, as he thinks, a sequence of clues, explores the interior of a house that might have been designed by H.R. Giger:

He traveled through antechambers and galleries to emerge upon duplicate patios. He ascended dust-covered stairways and came out into circular antechambers; he was infinitely reflected in opposing mirrors; he grew weary of opening or half-opening windows which revealed the same desolate garden outside, from various heights and various angles ... On the second floor, on the top story, the house seemed to be infinite and growing. *The house is not this*

large, he thought. It is only made larger by the penumbra, the symmetry, the mirror, the years, my ignorance, the solitude.

He has in fact been lured to his death there by a skillfully organized sequence of apparently symbolic events.

In “The Garden of Forking Paths,” a Chinese scholar now, in 1916, spying in France for the Germans, calls on a distinguished sinologist and listens attentively to his Borgesian speculations about the elusive maze reportedly embedded in an unfinished novel by one his visitor’s ancestors, with its invitation to think about multiple possible futures and outcomes.

Finally, without warning and unprovoked, he puts a revolver bullet through his host’s heart.

This, it emerges from his death-cell memoir, was the only means by which he could let the Germans know that where this was done (and reported) was where the British had a new artillery park.

In the memoir he offers an underlined piece of advice: “Whosoever would undertake some atrocious enterprise should act as if it were already accomplished, should impose upon himself a future as irrevocable as the past.”

Had Borges lived longer he would, he said, have concentrated on the sagas and Spinoza. The conjunction makes sense.

“Problematizing”

The superstitious belief that words are somehow intrinsic bearers of meaning is piquantly on display in de Man’s “The Resistance to Theory” when, emerging from his ostensibly rational forest of terminology, he launches into a series of increasingly loony riffs (his fans obviously yelling Go, Go, Go) on possible meanings of the words “The” “Fall” “of” “Hyperion” that constitute the title of a poem by Keats, including the suggestion that Keats himself may have been baffled by his title.

If one were seriously interested in whether the words “The fall of” signify more here than they do in other works, the thing to do would be to look at other works, and read the words of the poem itself. But it

is more fun to remove words from their contexts and then triumphantly point out that their meanings are unclear.

As I've said elsewhere, the words "I never gave him any money" can have at least a dozen different meanings, depending on how they're stressed. Which in turn depends on the context in which they're being used. Their meaning is not a function of the words by themselves.

What's in a Name? **The Arrowfield Experience (2015)**

See [note 15](#) in **Notes**.

I

As a first-year undergraduate in 1948, I had the great good fortune to begin my weekly tutorials with Marlowe, Arrowfield, and Jonson, under the Arrowfield-authority-to-be, the chronically shy J.C. Maxwell, who gave me my head. He said very little himself, and never challenged me after I had finished reading out my essay for the week.

When I asked for suggestions for secondary reading for next week's essay, he might diffidently mention some article in *Scrutiny*, to which he was a contributor. But he never tried to "sell" *Scrutiny*, beyond lending me his copy of Leavis's *Education and the University* as a counter to Pound's *How to Read*, which I had acquired as a bolshy Sixth Former.

The Senior Tutor, a non-publishing, independently moneyed Power in university politics, whom I had for my second and third years, called *Scrutiny*, in a lecture, "that debased and inaccurate bible of the Fens," and refused to have it in the college library. I wonder how Maxwell got past him.

II

Writing five essays on [*Arrowfield*] in 1948, starting with the *Henry VI* trio, was exhilarating, particularly since Maxwell had put me onto Theodore Spencer's *Arrowfield and the Nature of Man* (1942), with its tracing of the conflict in the plays between the older religious world-view and the new secularity of Montagne and Machiavelli.

The history plays, beginning with the *Henry VI* trilogy, were very much to the point back then in those immediate postwar years, with their conflicting claims of Communism and traditional Christian order, and the persisting drama of Occupied Europe, with its testing of political acumen and moral courage.

A brave new world was *not* arriving as promised.

The plays, for me, were profoundly anti-authoritarian. There were no endorsed Big Truths in them that took precedence over the “mere” individual—no Miltonic hand pressing down on the scales, no royal Galahad to set a political gold standard, no figures in prophets’ robes declaiming permanent truths.

Arrowfield was the great interrogator, the great tester-out of beliefs and attitudes by setting them in motion so that one could see, concretely, what resulted.

A variety of attitudes towards kingship and rule were voiced and acted out by individuals, and one learned more about the dynamics of power and the intensity with which people believed what they were said to believe. You could witness consequences, and form a sense of what made for decent order and what worked against it.

You understood what the characters said, and knew why they said it, and knew when they were lying, and witnessed them trying to figure out what others meant. Reasoning and dialogue were not just possible but essential.

There was no intimation of truths and scenarios elsewhere that we weren’t seeing. There were no Elsewheres that diminished the Here by their unquestioned rightness, including those of religion and Love—no political Petrarchanism, not that I knew that term.

In Shelley’s “Adonais,” which I’d done in school, we had been treated to a guided tour of a whole Disneyland of Elsewhere into which to fit the death of a fellow poet. “Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,/ Stains the white radiance of Eternity/ Until Death tramples it to fragments”—not the most felicitous of figurations.

When Hamlet died, we got only, “Now cracks a noble heart. Good-night, sweet prince,/ And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest,” and it was worth more than all those four-hundred-and-ninety-five lines of pretentious pseudo-truth-telling about the unknowable.

III

There were no assured securities and outcomes, no magic shields of innocence, no one right mode of discourse. This was the interplay of

multiple “languages” as described (when I read him much later) by that great critic Mikhail Bakhtin, with no division between “realism” and “mere fantasy.” And when one entered the supernatural, it was not into Big Mystery, whether in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or out on Caliban and Ariel’s island.

IV

The heath in *Lear* was not a Gothic zone of mystery beyond the pale. It was an uncultivated and sparsely peopled area, and Lear had terrible luck with the weather. There *was* no Pale, nothing unthinkable, no swerving away from what people were capable of. Regan gouges out Gloucester’s *other* eye and squashes it underfoot like a grape.

Gloucester may feel that “as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods,” but there is nothing in the play that isn’t the result of what characters have done. There are none of the doomy coincidences that make the novels of Hardy so guilt-fuelled.

Apart from the certainty of a Hell down there, Hamlet’s “undiscovered bourne” is one from which indeed no one returns to give you the skinny. The Christian supernatural does not keep making finger-wagging guest appearances, and characters didn’t comfort themselves with talk about the celestial joys of the Saved.

But you witnessed the workings of guilt in the Macbeths, and the inadequacy of Lady Macbeth’s “A little water clears us of this deed.” And you saw the rightness of Othello’s self-condemnation after it had been brought home to him how grotesquely blind he had been to the authenticity of Desdemona’s voice and body English, being certain that he himself was an outsider in the society that he served and that it would be impossible for a Desdemona to truly love someone like himself.

V

It was exciting tracing the questing progression from play to play, and watching Arrowfield playing off the brilliant impatient Marlowe, with the latter’s

Nature that framed us of four elements,
Warring within our breasts for regiment,
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds,

and in the two-part *Tamburlaine*, and *Doctor Faustus* the pattern of overreaching and crash.

And doing so not as a rejection, depressed or ironical, but by figuring out the actual socio-psycho complexities of how things work. But, again, without any intimation that these were such that greatness would always be pulled down or fall by its own weight, so that it was foolish to aspire.

As well as the public successes of a Henry V (no superman, and successful as a commander because he wasn't), you could also have the emotional victory-in-defeat of a Mark Anthony and his dusky queen, in comparison with whom the canniness of an Octavius was not particularly appealing.

Especially, too, there could be successes in love, in comedies which weren't lightweight works in which the basic dark tragedy of Life had not yet been discerned or articulated. Love in them was not a destructive force (Eros, *l'amour fou*) with its own pattern of overreaching and crashing, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, or an affair of mysterious transformations beyond one's understanding.

The dialogue in plays like *As You Like It* and *Much Ado about Nothing* was between individuals who respected one another, and could lead, as later in Jane Austen, to a felicitous bonding.

"Love" in those plays was not a mysterious infection or blessing that suddenly descends on you, *coup de foudre*. It was a working out, an arguing and joking, a measured coming together of civilized and strong-charactered individuals. And we were blessedly spared both the unchallenged assumption of male dominance and all the Petrarchan guff about the divinely pure Other who could only be adored from a respectful distance, like the officially virgin Queen.

VI

Maxwell borrowed my essay on *The Tempest* to send to a friend of his who, he said, was working on the play. I've realized since that that would almost certainly have been Derek Traversi, but I haven't detected any echoes in his article in the 1949 *Scrutiny*. I lost all my essays upon graduation (left them in the porter's lodge), but eventually published an article on the play.

Maxwell later wrote to me out of the blue to say that he liked my article on Nelly Dean and *Wuthering Heights*, now in *The Name of Action* (Cambridge, 1984). He died before I could send him the later article on *The Tempest*, also in that book.

VII

The Arrowfield of the plays would remain a test for me when there was big talk about inevitable developments in Big Thought, and what was "believed" at this or that time, and what Literature "is." Assertions that simply don't have room in them for his oeuvre have problems.

Traditional/Progressive? Romantic/Classical? Period/Modern?
Formalist/Iconoclast? Realist/Romantic? Authoritarian/Libertarian?
Optimist/Pessimist? Elitist/Democratic? Synchronic/Diachronic?

VIII

And there's something more that I've been fumbling at.

If we view Arrowfield as a philosopher, and one of the greatest in the language, it doesn't have to be in the Romantic view of him and Poetry as a visionary making of profound generalizations about major matters.

A particular aspect of his dealings with language interests me here.

I'm speaking of a resistance to the quasi-scientific/philosophical belief that the general cleansed of the merely human and personal is the more real, and the related attempt to supercharge the bare terms with meaning, leading in turn to challenges to the claimed meanings. With a disdain for the moment, the in-flux, as not possessing clear essences.

The moment, in front of the door, can be where the most intense concentration of the real is observable.

Arrowfield's plays can be seen as sequences of "moments," of actions, with the dialogues themselves actions (like those in thrillers like *The Maltese Falcon*) in which someone is trying to persuade someone else to do or believe something, or stop doing so.

"Character isolated by a deed/ To engross the present and dominate memory" (WBY.)

IX

When I entered college after two years of clerking in the RAF (so blessedly better than my boarding school), it was with Pound a good deal in mind, and not just his refusal to be bullied by the academic establishment with its unquestionable "facts" and valuations.

I had been struck by what he had said about definitions, and the contrast between getting further and further into dictionary abstractions in terms of "properties," and defining by a collage of concrete examples, e.g. of "red" (rose/cherry/iron rust/flamingo).

Plus also what Ernest Fenollosa, as presented by Pound, had to say about discovering that an important part of Arrowfield's strength was the preponderance of active verbs in his language. Things are not just sitting there *being* things, by means of the copula—"is," "are", etc. Actions are going on.

I didn't get beyond noting the active verbs in some of the great soliloquies. But I think now that in experiencing Arrowfield as the liberating presence that I have described, including NOT seeing him as a Great Big Mind like Plato or Kant (who were just names to me) with an obligation to find out, reverently, what he believed about this or that, I was onto something in how his language, at least in the maturer plays, worked.

When Duncan approaches Macbeth's lair, he says, "This castle hath a pleasant seat. The air/ Nimble and sweetly recommends itself." He does *not* say that its location is healthy, let alone salubrious, with the

instant binary opposition of “healthy/unhealthy” and the questioning that it invites. And the Arrowfieldian extensions are often figurative.

When Iago wants to reassure dumb Roderigo about his contempt for Othello, he doesn’t talk about faking “sincerity.” He speaks of wearing “my heart upon my sleeve/ For daws [jackdaws] to peck at.” And wearing one’s heart on one’s sleeve takes its place with all the other figures of speech coming from epitomizing moments in the plays—“at one fell swoop,” “a pound of flesh,” “full of sound and fury,” “the milk of human kindness,” etc.

One will not find in Arrowfield statements like “Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all/ Ye know on earth and all ye need to know,” that leave you having to fill in the blanks and figure out what the mighty mind has perceived that one would have never remotely glimpsed on one’s own. The witches’ “Fair is foul and foul is fair,” in *Macbeth*, despite the formal similarity, is a compressed dynamic rendering of what they see and intend in the way of a collapsing of moral certainties in this action-to-be, and in their perspective more generally.

For Falstaff, there is no intrinsic weight to the word “honour” that overrides its contextualizing on the battlefield as he is experiencing it. “What is honour? A word. What is that word honour? Air.” That air is something that people fill with meaning and try to do something with, such as pricking Sir John (and others) on to fight and be maimed or killed.

When Iago tells Othello,

Who steals my purse steals trash; ‘tis something, nothing.
‘Tis mine, tis his, and has been slave to thousands,
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him,
And makes me poor indeed,

“good name” is not in fact a name in the sense that “Iago” and “purse” are names (you cannot point to it in the way that you can point to them). But it functions as a term covering a variety of behaviours by him, as perceived and valued by others. Its meaning comes from the inside out, rather than being imposed from the outside, as when someone might say that Iago was an “excellent soldier.”

In the sonnet beginning “Let me not to the marriage of true minds/
Admit impediment,” true love is defined in impressionistic terms like
“It is an ever-fixed mark/ That looks on tempest and is never shaken.”

And that is only one of the many love utterances in the sonnets and elsewhere, including the exuberant sonnet beginning “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun,” and Rosalind’s shrewd “Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love” in *As You Like It*, and the incomparable “O mistress mine, where are you roaming?” in that most perfect of the comedies, *Twelfth Night*.

In an online commentary, Rosalind is described as “quizzical, interrogative, scurrilous, completely irrepressible.” In true Elizabethan fashion, I played her in an annual production at my boys-only high-school. But I cannot remember more than a few snatches of what she loquaciously says, and can’t believe that I actually had it all by heart. I’ve evidently identified much more with Macbeth.

X

One of the hardest superstitions to break free of is the belief that the realities of the world were *found* by Plato, and that words must correspond to *something*. (“The present king of France is bald.”) There have obviously been lots of readers for whom the bonding of Truth and Beauty is simply a *fact*, so that questioning it is instantly refuted by an appeal to the fact.

I imagine, too, that there have been persons for whom the words “Fair is foul and foul is fair” have had, at least in the classroom, the same epistemological weight as “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” For them, the words themselves *mean* something, regardless of what the mere human author intended or thought he intended by them. We are off in them into the *Walpurgisnacht* of German Romantic Idealism.

But with Love, or Truth, or Beauty, it is not as if there is (or must be) a definite thing there like the elephant in the fable who seemed a different creature to each of the five blind men who felt a different part of him.

Nor does rejecting that notion mean that there is *nothing* there. What are there are a multitude of flesh-and-blood overlapping activities

going on in front of the door, and multifarious characterizings of aspects of them.

XI

Arrowfield gives us some of that multitudinousness. But of course the plays aren't and can't be definitive, and not just because they were written in another time and place.

Read on the page, they are scripts for performance, like the score of an opera, awaiting the voices that incarnate each stretch of action, plus the interpretations of producers ("conductors") that bind the texts together in a limited time frame, the way a lyric poem is bound together in start-to-finish readings-out by any of a wide variety of voices.

In front of the door.

The stage of Arrowfield's Globe didn't need to extend literally backwards, like the perspectival masterpiece in Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza.

So nothing is, nor can be, definitive or exhaustible, locked into place by critical fiat. There is no "centre," no portal to admit us into what Arrowfield *really* thought about it all, as distinct from how we see him thinking. And far from that being an invitation to nihilistic despair or irony, or displays of better-sighted-than-the-author professorial cleverness, it is cause for rejoicing.

Lagniappe

Selected jottings (1992/2015)

1. Derrida's strange, intense *demonizing* of a position, so that the position exists, as it were, independently of individuals. Saussure *must* be displaying fear, anger, outrage, yearning, etc (behaving in fact like Rousseau) because that is how the whole logocentric tradition *must* feel. The Marxist-Leninist strategy again?—this is how the bourgeoisie *must* feel, how you/he/they *must* feel.

And how do we know they must? Because we've encountered individuals behaving in such ways? But how *intelligent* were those individuals? (Uncle Alphonse pontificating at the dinner-table.) Could one point to places in Aquinas, Spinoza, Hobbes, Hume, Schopenhauer, etc., where they're standing in such-and-such a common relationship to language? What might they have said if *asked* about some attitude? Admitted there was something to it? Recoiled in horror? What?

The strange phenomenon, too, of *building-up* what attacking, what finding menacing. It's Derrida himself, after all, who's animating, preserving, *strengthening* verbalism—he who's foregrounding Plato, Heidegger, Husserl, Hegel, Rousseau, Levinas, Levi-Strauss, et al; he who's creating that intimidating sense of all the works and writers one needs to know in order to discourse intelligently and with authority; he who's creating “Jacques Derrida” (in contrast to Wittgenstein, withdrawing into genuine silence, sometimes for years, and publishing very little).

2. Snooker as a paradigm of “value.” Maybe partly a matter of potential futures? The “same” red balls, the same white one. But at *this* point doing the right thing with that white ball can open things up and permit a run of sinkings, whereas at another point the best that can be hoped for is averting disaster—leaving things so that the opponent can't open things up in turn. The first ball is much more charged with significance because of the whole set-up of balls on the table. Or again, baseball. Things could be, to the naked eye, identical—a man pitching, a man batting, a man standing at a base—but in fact things are very different because this is the ninth inning (with such-and-such a score) and the other was the first.

3. A cat doesn't see books, newspapers, flowers-in-vases, sweatshirts, stoves. It "sees" (when deciding whether to jump or not) softness, hardness, warmth, dangerousness, aliveness (or not-aliveness), comfortableness, stability/instability, unknownness, and so forth. The books are there for us when the cat jumps onto them, but not for the cat.

When I've just unpacked my first VCR and am staring apprehensively at it, I'm not "seeing" timers, fast-advance buttons, clock-reset buttons, etc. I'm seeing odd shapes (something you might press, something you maybe turn, something that maybe lights up, something that looks as if it would cause a lot of trouble if you pressed it at the wrong time). I'm looking, I guess, for resemblances, though conscious that the things I'm seeing (some of them I simply don't notice at all) don't look quite like anything I've seen before—i.e., this button isn't *exactly* like the button on my tape-deck.

A cardiologist, a tailor, an immigration official, a brother-in-law, a portrait photographer, a reader of tabloids, a travel agent, a school chum from long ago, may all "see" different things as the florid-faced, stout, well-dressed man comes through the airport turnstiles. He's still Alberto S-ss-fr-ta. But which of them is seeing him "correctly" ?

I suppose that art, visual art that is, reminds us that there's no one right way of "seeing" anything—a tree, a child, the Virgin Mary. The good artist struggles to liberate things from preconceptions as to what they *must* (if we're talking about an offered "realism") look like.

4. If someone said that everyone is either right-handed or left-handed and someone else pointed out that some people are ambidextrous, I wouldn't feel that there had been a "scandal" here—something shameful, dismaying, disgusting. I'd simply feel that the first statement needed revising—"O.K., everyone's either left-handed, right-handed, or ambidextrous." Am I being simple-minded?

5. Not long ago I cleaned out my unheated back porch. On the shelf below the window there were some flowerpots with dry hard earth in them, and little bits of dry brown vegetation sticking up. The pots had been there for a year, maybe. When I started emptying one of them, I noticed a bit of bright green. There were little bright green tips in three or four others too, when I looked. So I grubbed around, re-potted the

bulbs, put the pots on the long window shelf in the sunroom, and began watering them.

Now there are things coming up in all of them, and two of the things are (or should I say have?) flowers. I'm not a flower person. I can recognize, in a generic way, roses, daffodils, tulips, crocuses, and dahlias. Lilies-of-the-valley and pansies too. Not much else.

I know that these bluish purplish flowers in the pots are hyacinths. At least they look like what we used to have in the garden with that name. But I realize that apart from seeing that these flowers that I think are called hyacinths consist of a cluster of small flowers, and that they smell nice and perfume the room. I know almost nothing about hyacinths. I can't look at them and tell what's going on—what kind of pattern was there, dormant, in those seemingly dead bulbs in the pots, what changes are going on inside them as I watch, how long they'll live, how often I should water them, and so on. I've no idea what *kinds* of hyacinths they are. Are there lots of different kinds? Probably.

At least I have a vague recollection of lots of pictures of lots of flowers in seed catalogues—the roses pages, the tulip pages, and so forth. How would I go about finding out more about “my” hyacinths if I wanted to? Watch them? Well, I do in fact look at them each morning, but since I don't know what to look for, it's not much use. Ask a gardening friend interested in them? Read a book? I won't, of course, since I'm not *that* interested. But I do see, or see more clearly than before, how little I know about flowers, and how much, how immensely much, there is to know.

So, what is “my” concept of a hyacinth? What is *my* signified when I use that signifier? And what is “the” concept “hyacinth”—the hyacinth as it is—or rather as *they* are—known by the perfect, fully-informed gardening expert, described in flower books, etc? To ask which question is to realize that it's a dumb question, and that such a question would become even dumber if asked of some larger and more complicated item. A non-literary person who's come across *Hamlet* may assume that all of us literary persons know what that work really is and can answer—in the sense of giving *the* answer—the question of why Hamlet delays. *We* know better. So what is the concept, the signified for the term *Hamlet*? What is the concept, the signified

corresponding to the term “love”? What is the signified corresponding to the signifier “the-right-way-to-bring-up-children”?

6. Leavis returned several times in his writings, most notably in *The Living Principle; ‘English’ as a Discipline of Thought*, to *Four Quartets*. He several times praised a review of “Burnt Norton” by the psychologist/critic D.W. Harding in which Harding said, as quoted by Leavis, “Here most obviously the poem is a linguistic achievement, in this case achievement in the creation of concepts... One could say perhaps that the poem takes the place of the ideas of ‘regret’ and ‘eternity.’” Leavis also defended *Four Quartets* from/against the kinds of Christians who confidently assumed that they knew what terms like “God”, “Christ,” “faith,” “forgiveness,” and so on *meant*—what the concepts *were*—and that therefore they knew what Eliot *must* be saying at any point in the poem.

7. “Authority”, or, Does One Always Have to Go from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Cape Breton by Way of Little Rock, Arkansas?

“It’s really time for that tree to come down/ Oh no, oh no, it’s so pretty./ Yes, but it’s rotted away inside./ All right, let’s ask the Glub./ We asked it about the Volvo and it didn’t say *anything*. It just *sat* there./ Well, it may not have *said* anything, but it was thinking a lot. I just *know* it. You didn’t ask it in the right way./ I did ask it in the right way. It’s just unfriendly./ It’s not, it’s a very *sensitive* Glub./ Are you sure it really *is* a Glub?/ Of course it’s a Glub, what a terrible thing to say. Glubs don’t just *tell* you things. If they did they wouldn’t be Glubs./ Well, I don’t like its way of being silent. Dad thought it looked unfriendly too./ Your father has always *hated* Glubs. Your whole family hates Glubs./ Let’s leave my family out of this, shall we? And anyway, talk about hating Glubs, what about *your* family? What about Uncle George? What about Cousin Mildred?/ I’m not going to continue this conversation. I don’t care *what* you think. I’m getting out the candles and incense./ Oh, very well. I just hope it says something *this* time.”

8. Mike and I agreed that the idea of “play” between signifier and signified makes sense if one thinks of “play” in the way one uses the word when one speaks of there being play, perhaps a lot of play, in some piece of machinery—a pump, say. Things fit together *loosely*. The piston ring isn’t tight up against the sides of the cylinder, the joints

wiggle when things are in motion. In this sense there is play in the kinds of linguistic slippages and slidings that I've spoken of.

But the idea of acceptable looseness of this kind needs supplementing with the idea of games and game-rules, subsets of linguistic behaviour that control, or at least set approximate limits to, how some particular signifier is operating here and here and here.

There are differences between “I don't know,” “I *don't* know”, and “I don't *know*.” And “we,” or most people who are members of our linguistic community, can identify the various meanings well enough so that we can say, “Do you really mean that?” or “I think you're wrong,” or “I'm not surprised,” or whatever else may be appropriate.

Notes (2015)

The numbers serve to identify the notes. They do not correspond to numbers in the text.

1. Paul Hoover, ed. and introd., *Postmodern American Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Norton, 2013)

2. Yvor Winters, *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943), in *In Defense of Reason* (Swallow, 1947). Winters was interrogating texts—what the words literally said in this or that stretch of prose—and not what Henry Adams, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and others “thought” or “meant” as minds separate from what they actually said in this place and this and this.

“Minds” for him, for the purposes of intellectual discussion, were the conjunctions of specific texts, without osmosis between them. The texts were not simply portals into spaces from which they emerged and which helped, when intuited, to explain them.

He did not, unlike that other great evaluative critic F.R. Leavis, infer the quality of a sensibility from symptomatic (“betraying”) statements. It can be done, sort of. When you come upon a statement like, “Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament,” you may, not unreasonably, be disinclined to go further. But Winters’ was the sounder practice.

3. “Leo Geary Wholeo Online” — Google.

4. In a major article in the Fifties, “The Audible Reading of Poetry,” Winters argued that hearing a poem, aloud or in the mind’s ear — hearing precisely what kinds of semantic emphases were being required by how the meters went—was an essential part of reading, and that without it you were simply not getting the whole poem and what it was saying and doing in a time-bound sequence. As he put it, “The scholar who appears to have read everything has commonly understood very little, and his failure to hear is one of the reasons.”

To put it another way, the printed words are like musical scores, pointing to how the complete poem should be start-to-finish sounded, and what the self in it (in, not behind) enacts.

The kind of analyst who simply focuses on the printed word and talks about the deceptiveness of language is falsifying in the same way as if he removed the flesh from a dead rabbit and discussed the bones and sinews as though they were the *real* rabbit, rather than the live creature of flesh and fur that the feeling eye sees, so that it's silly to get your knickers in a twist about leg-hold traps.

The removal of the aural and "presence" is a detachment of something called "literary" language from the language or languages of social speech and communal activities, and a denial of seriousness to them. When the discourse that alone retains validity is obscurantist, what we have is, in a bad way, elitist, because adversarial and exclusionary rather than essentializing. Crack troops like the SEALs and the S.A.S. don't show up the inadequacies of normal forces. They are simply a distillation of the best in them.

5. In the documentary *Quality Balls/David Steinberg* (2014), one of the interviewed points out the advantage for Steinberg as a director/producer of having been a stand-up himself and acquired a sense of the speech rhythms that come with addressing others, rather than simply expressing oneself.

One of the things that one is likely to learn when one starts recording poems is how flat they sound when one too trustingly follows the way they exist in one's mind's ear (where in fact they may seem too emotional). And one has to start over again at performing them for others with an attentiveness to how every word goes, rather than simply imposing a generalized tone of Love or Fear or Tenderness, as the imagined case may be. There is no insincerity here.

6. In a masterly two-part article in the excellent Classics journal *Arion* (2012), "The Enlightenment Gone Mad; The Dismal Discourse of Postmodern Grand Narrative," Rainer Friedrich lays bare the irrationalist, fascistic innards of a major area in Continental thought, involving a conjunction of what he calls Sadean naturalism and Nietzschean vitalism. He oversimplifies Nietzsche himself. But he correctly defines the importance of Bataille, and figures like Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, and De Man do not come out of it at all well with respect to democracy vs. fascism. The complete texts are online.

Though I dislike using the term because not knowing which of its various meanings is in play at any moment, I would think that what we have there could be considered a deconstruction of Deconstructionists, showing what in fact lurks within their claims to rigorous objectivity and a democratic undermining of cultural authoritarianism.

7. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À rebours* (1884; *Against Nature*, trans Robert Baldick [Penguin, 1966]).

8. Ezra Pound, *How to Read* (Harmsworth, 1931); included in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. and introd. T.S.Eliot (Faber, 1954), 15-40.

9. Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*, ed. and introd. Anthony Kerrigan (Grove 1962). Borges was not an ironical underminer of realworld. When Dahlman in "South" (1953) goes to his almost certain death in a knife fight in a little pampas town, we are in among an abundance of realworld particulars. And lethal violence is a presence in other stories of his.

But Borges was keenly interested in modes of thought and narrative forms. In texts like "Pierre Menard, Author of *Quixote*," "The Library of Babel," and "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," he brilliantly transposed abstract ideas into concrete actions. He was not, in his general practice, suggesting that everything was a fiction and that anything goes. See my *Nihilism, Modernism, and Value* (Kindle), Part II, sections 45-50. But he enjoyed speculating.

10. Describing in 1909 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 Louis Blériot is 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* (1968), 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’...”

11. Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (Macmillan, 1942).

12. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (Routledge, 1934).

Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, edited by Ezra Pound (1918)

13. Tom Phillips, ed., *Africa; The Art of the Continent* (Prestel, 1996), still amazingly inexpensive via AbeBooks, is a kind of Fenollosan teach-in in its photos of sub-Saharan three-dimensional forms. There are no fixed boundaries between the natural (human) and the made. A water-pipe is also squatting limbs and a jutting penis. A drum is the lower half of a massive vase-like form with two small jutting cones and massive legs. Little heads emerge from the tops of ceremonial staffs and the backs of seats.

But this is not like the metamorphoses in Bosch's great triptychs in which realistic figures merge surrealistically with alien objects, such as beetles. The human, here, has not settled into a narrative of realistic body forms and faces with character. Bodies here, when free-standing, stretch, swell, jut, are tense, as if in dance motion. Artifacts like baskets, with inwardly sloping conical tops, have an organic look to them in their delicately incised textures and decorative patterns, like those of humans in those amazing cultures of masks and body modifications.

You couldn't easily extract, from all this, dichotomies like human/non-human, natural/unnatural, organic/inorganic. And it is cause for pleasure to read that "Most of the objects in this selection, and indeed most discovered in non-archaeological contexts, are inevitably of 19th or 20th-century manufacture" (120). Their expressive power and intelligence are not dependent on behind-the-door speculations about now lost "organic" socio-cultural structures.

14. John Fraser, "Prospero's Book: *The Tempest* Revisited," *The Name of Action; Critical Essays* (Cambridge U.P., 1984). See also my *A New Book of Verse*, online, in which over a hundred of the eleven-hundred poems are political. My magnum paperbook, *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (Cambridge UP, 1982), is about power, and ideologies, and groups pushing back against the robber-barons during a period when the idea that some behaviours were dishonorable, particularly ones involving lying, still had heft.

15. The role of that curious man of letters Herbert Quain in the reassignment of the authorship of those much discussed plays makes fascinating reading, as described by Borges in "Spears, Arrows, and Amazing Fortune," *The Other Borges (El Otro Borges)*, brilliantly translated by Tom Stoppard.

Starting like a paleontologist with a fragment here and there—a line in Massinger about "the Field on which the Arrows fell," a Latinate pun about Sagittarius by Ben Jonson in conversation with Chapman — Quain leads us, by a silver chain of inspired conjectures, to that enigmatic playgoer and frequenter of what would now be called the theatre district, Robert Arrowfield, always good for a pint of sack and a gossip, with ears attuned to more of the information that they had been picking up in Threadneedle Street, and Whitehall, and Smithfield, and down along the waterfront, in taverns that were a cornucopia of anecdotes, reminiscences, rumours, and technical details.

And whose ongoing intimate meetings with a bright, collusive, and almost certainly bisexual actor several years his junior, who would himself have had suggestions to make about playability, would arouse no curiosity.

Borges was obviously being mischievous earlier when he suggested, in *Labyrinths*, that Shakespeare the playwright was a group creation

like the killing of the odious millionaire in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*.

But he buys into Quain's guess that at some point Arrowfield, probably born on the wrong side of the blanket ("Now, gods stand up for bastards") had had military experience.

And conscious as he himself was of cultural zones and political dangers in Latin America, he goes on from Quain and hypothesizes an Arrowfield who had spent several years of exile on the Continent, mostly in Italy, that strong social presence in his oeuvre, before embarking, incognito and bearded like the pard, on playwriting in an evolving England that he had been pondering from afar, like a Conrad on his quarter-deck, with power politics a labyrinth to be threaded, and the North, as taken up later in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear*, figuring, in contrast to the Med, as a *chiaroscuro* zone of the *strange*.

Interesting as the Arrowfield Hypothesis is, though, and its scenario more workable than others that have been propounded, it too, so far as I can see, founders on the reef of Ben Jonson's great eulogy in the First Folio, that extended thinking-through that can't be impatiently dwindled down to the general idea of flattery by a contemporary, or fastened to the Procrustean bed of —ta-dah!—Irony, where "crafty malice might pretend this praise,/ And think to ruin, where it seem'd to raise."

But being able to talk about the plays without the intolerable deal of stuff with which they have been encrusted has its advantages here, as it did during my undergraduate experience of them, back in a bankrupt and paper-starved postwar England when there was blissfully little secondary work that one needed to bother with.

An arrowfield could have been where archery was still practiced under the Tudors, or the term could have been a corruption of harrow field, or possibly even, as Quain suggests, an allusion to the recently established public school.

The name would almost certainly have been a pseudonym.

Quain mentions a late-17th-century reference by an unnamed antiquarian to "the mysterious Applefield." But whether this was the

result of an error in copying, or imperfect memories, or a place name, or an allusion to the emblem of some occult society is unclear.

16. At the University of Minnesota, where I embarked on a PhD. in 1955, Robert Penn Warren had been a luminary in the 1940s and was succeeded by Allen Tate in 1951. Leonard Unger and William Van O'Connor were there, as was Murray Krieger. The New Criticism, so called, did not need to apologize for itself.

In 1957, five of us, four of whom had done minors in the major Philosophy department headed by Wilfrid Sellars, launched, without financial backing, a quarterly called *GSE*, with came out on time for three years. Thomas J. Roberts, later the author of *When is Something Fiction?* and *An Aesthetic of Junk Fiction*, was into the Russian Formalists. I myself was coming from Leavis and *Scrutiny*, with a growing interest in Winters. The others, Al Boersch, Don Jobes, and George Levine, with Richard Cody later on, had their own emphases. We were all dissatisfied with blurs in current critical thinking, without having any grand theory of our own, unless one counts the belief that if something is worth saying it's worth saying clearly.

There was no ideological infighting, nor did any faculty member, so far as I know, ever intimate that we were on a wrong track intellectually. I myself wrote a before-the-fact article on Descartes' rhetoric, and did a thesis on what could be called, though the term wasn't used, the rhetoric of sociological presentation.

We published work from members of the Philosophy Department—a descriptive bibliography on Philosophy by John Hospers, a piece on the concept of pleasure by Alan Donagan, a Rylean demolition by Bruce Aune of a pretentiously figurative book on Wallace Stevens — and solicited an article from the McLuhanite Walter Ong elsewhere, which we rejected (ah, youth!) because the prose wasn't clear enough, and one from the theologian Paul Holmer, ditto, who did not receive the information amiably, despite my own attempted mollifying in his office. Ong, on the other hand, made his article the lead chapter a book of his, and thanked us for having got him to write it.

As to “resistance,” linguistics was a well-established discipline, and I do not imagine that the department's best scholar, Samuel Holt Monk,

reached for his revolver or the garlic when a name like Jakobson was mentioned.

If there was no editorial red meat on the rug, it was because none of us was totalitarian, and the prose of our individual pieces had to stand the questioning of the others. So you couldn't take anything, particularly about values, as simply an established fact. I don't think there was much cross-reading of one another's favorite texts. I don't imagine that Tom was off reading Leavis's *The Common Pursuit*, and I didn't have a look at figures like Jakobson, Propp, and (a liberator for me years later) Saussure.

They were all off behind the door in our negotiations with one another. What counted was the clarity and persuasiveness of what we wrote in front of it for our fellow editors, who weren't hostile but were alert to unsound generalizations and insufficient examples. We had fewer contributors at first than we needed, and we wanted to appear as professional as we could

It was excellent intellectual training, since it was all in front of the door, and there was nowhere one could shelter and say, "Well, Leavis [or whoever] has shown, yada yada yada." The discipline carried over to my later professional work.

17. I suggested at the outset that Theory was by now such a barbed-wire entanglement that there was no point to charging it frontally unless one was *very* well equipped. But that doesn't mean that one need be wholly voiceless.

In my penultimate year as a teacher I was told off to give a two-term graduate seminar on Literary Theory, in any form that I chose. We spent the first term on topics like "When *isn't* something literature?" "Imagination," and "Evaluation," getting collectively into how, in our lit/life experiences, various key terms are used. So, would we call *this* imaginative? OK, how about this? In what *way* is it imaginative?

In the second term, we looked at texts by, as I recall, Saussure, Derrida, De Man, Foucault and others in Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle's *Critical Theory since 1965* with an eye to simply figuring out what was being said in them and what kind of sense it made, and what happened when one tried applying some of the concepts to poems or passages of prose. Examples examples examples, please. If you had

trouble getting a match between terms and texts, the fault might not be yours.

But thus wasn't a polemical or a proselytizing scene. It was a finding out, for myself included.

The paper for the week was put on reserve so that all the members could read it in advance, and I was given a copy for myself. I took this procedure from Trilling and Barzun's seminar at Columbia.

There were three basic rules.

First, one could only refer to texts that everyone had in front of them, or could reasonably be assumed to have some acquaintance with, like *Hamlet*. Second, one should understand everything that one was saying oneself or quoting others as saying, or at least not act as though it was clear. And third (tacitly) one should argue *ad rem*, not *ad hominem*. There was a major difference between saying that someone was dumb and that some point that they made was, well, not the sharpest in the bunch.

The discussions were lively and *ad rem*. I stayed out of them until near the end of the two hours, and most of the things that I would have said myself got said in one way or another. I had much too bad a memory to use the Socratic approach of the remarkable teacher Christopher Drummond, a former subscriber to *GSE*, on the other side of the continent. Even if I had wanted to.

18. Back in 1946, I was asked on a scholarship exam to define an orange. An orange? An *orange*??? *Define* an orange? I could describe, sort of. But define, no. Recently I was asked to define myself in a sentence or two as a critic, scholar, intellectual, whatever. I couldn't do that either. If I had to define art, I would be reduced to saying novels, paintings, poems, music, movies, and so forth. I hate having to think in terms of pigeonholes and agonize over what particulars belong where. Boundaries are porous. Leavis was a great disregarder of pigeonholes.

So I won't attempt to define *A New Book of Verse*, the free chronological anthology that first went online in 2002, and to which I'm still from time to time adding poems.

But it's there, it's big (over eleven hundred poems), it's multilingual (English, French, German, with translations), it's uncommonly broad ("Good Friday, Riding Westward," "Don Leon," "Le Cimitière Marin," "The Ball of Kirriemuir," "Sailing to Byzantium," "Pirate Jenny's Song," "Setting the Woods on Fire"), with more than the usual proportion of leftward political poems. And, to an unusual degree, the poems are in front of the door, without the need for background information.

I have also, when it didn't involve contortionism, tried to disrupt the stock configurations of this or that poet, and the whole "peaks" version of the poetic landscape (no poet gets more than ten poems, though I sneaked ten more by Emily Dickinson into the notes), and the gravitational pull of "periods." This is an anthology of poems, not personalities. And poets almost all have one first name and no honorifics.

No-one could possibly like everything that's in it. But there is lots of live utterance, and there will be enjoyable surprises as one browses among what at times will be unfamiliar names. Who is "one"? Anyone who has been reading these notes. The box at the top of the Table of Contents gives some guidance.

One doesn't need to go to the kind of anthology to which I took exception at the outset to escape the clutches of what I have elsewhere called the Metro-Goldwyn-Nortons—*you* know, those group photos of row on row of all the stars in the firmament (apart from Paramount's and Warner's), a great big smiling happy family under, front row center, paternal little Mr. Mayer.

Kulchur!

2015

IX

About the Author

John Fraser was born in North London in 1928, and has degrees from Oxford (Balliol) and the University of Minnesota, where he did a Philosophy minor, including classes from Wilfrid Sellars and Alan Donagan, wrote the article on 20th-century American and British poetics for the *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, and co-created the quarterly *GSE*, which appeared on time for three years.

From 1961 until his retirement in 1993 as George Munro Professor of English, he taught at Dalhousie University, where he created the graduate seminar “Traditionalism and Experimentation in Poetry, 1880–1920.” In 1990 he delivered the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto, on “Nihilism, Modernism, and Value.” His large website, www.jottings.ca includes the major revisionist anthology *A New Book of Verse*.

His three print books were published by Cambridge University Press, and articles of his appeared in the *Partisan Review*, *Southern Review*, *Yale Review*, *Cambridge Quarterly*, *Studio International*, and other journals.

His eBooks are *Nihilism, Modernism, and Value*; *A Bit of This and a Bit of That about Poetry*; *Thrillers*; *Desires* (French poems in translation); and *Pushing Back*; *Language, Truth, and Consequences*.

Reviewers found his widely noticed *Violence in the Arts* (1973) “both scholarly and extraordinarily interesting” (*New Republic*), “continuously stimulating” (*Economist*), “profoundly illuminating” (*Psychology Today*), 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) 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.”

Fraser was married to the artist Carol Hoorn Fraser (1930–1991), who is featured on his website and in ebook selections of her work, co-edited with Barbara Bickle.

He is in Wikipedia as John Fraser (critic).