

THE PURSUIT OF POETRY: A DEFENCE

AN INAUGURAL LECTURE
DELIVERED AT RHODES UNIVERSITY
on 18 July 1990

by

PROFESSOR JOHN GOUWS
MA (Rhodes) DPhil (Oxon)



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Human beings are rather like glaciers. We cannot account for the terminal moraine, the crumbling fragments of present experience, without being aware of the ponderous and incalculable mass of the past bearing down upon us. I cannot possibly acknowledge all the influences which have brought me to where I am now. Nor will I attempt to thank by name those friends and colleagues who have borne the discomfort of earlier versions of this lecture. I simply acknowledge that I am here continuing an incomplete conversation, and thank them for allowing me to discover what it is I want to say.

An occasion such as this does, however, allow me to single out three major figures in my intellectual history. Until my last year of school, I was determined to be an astro-physicist -- the young are often foolishly ambitious. Towards the end of that year I heard Guy Butler lecture on *Hamlet*, and I realised that much closer to hand there are matters as momentous as the distant galaxies. Since then I have been guided by -- or to use true Renaissance astrological terminology, I have been influenced by -- his benign generosity of spirit. Thanks to him I have been saved the indignity of Thales, who stumbled into a pit while gazing at the stars.

In my first year at university I met the person who has taught me more than any other. Ruth Harnett still teaches me, and I admit that I shall not

ever know as much about English poetry as she does. Even more than the subject-matter of literature, she has taught me that it takes courage to tell and to accept the truth. It is often a very painful experience, but I shall always be grateful for a teacher and friend who would risk telling me what is sterile and unimaginative, and that second-best will not do.

I mention Daantjie Oosthuizen last because he is no longer with us. Although he died more than twenty years ago, many of those present remember him. He was one of the great and humane teachers of this university. From him I learnt to refuse easy, inhumane answers; to respect the courage of those who live with the consequences of difficult answers; always to pay as much attention to the questions which give rise to the answers as to the answers themselves; and, most important of all, never to shy away from asking the big questions.

In what follows I hope that some of their wisdom bears fruit. I have appropriated ideas from two philosophers with opposing ideological assumptions, Charles Taylor and Michael Oakeshott, but I have discarded their inadequate notions about poetry.¹ I also find myself in sympathy with Anthony O'Hear, but think he is still hampered by the notion that poetry makes statements.² Much of the argument can be seen as a response to Wallace Stevens's poem "Of Modern Poetry"; I am very concerned to counter the partial truths embodied in the recent film, *Dead Poets Society* -- poetry and the study of poetry demand much more than such a film naively presupposes. The lecture itself is self-indulgently modelled on the form of a traditional rhetorical defence: exordium, narration, proposition, division, examination, refutation, peroration.

THE PURSUIT OF POETRY:

A DEFENCE

EXORDIUM

When the spirited and virtuously negligent Philip Sidney once heard a ravishing discourse in praise of horses and horsemen, he almost cast aside his name and nature, wishing himself no longer simply a lover of horses but a horse itself. In much the same way, his own honied eloquence can still almost intoxicate any one of us into bestraddling Pegasus in his wild career and wishing ourselves poets. For myself, I cannot claim to have continued long in the illusion that I could be either a horse, an equestrian or a poet. For this reason, the ecstatic praise of those arts is best left to their practitioners. So, too, are the rhapsodic defences. But where the enthusiasm and example of Sidney and many others can encourage me to speak out with affection and commitment, it is in the matter of studying poetry, not as something made, but as something understood. If I then speak with better intentions than sense, with less enthusiasm and more attention, it is because I follow these master-spirits as an under-labourer bent on clearing a space where noble riders might enter freely, where they could be saluted and understood.

NARRATIO

Poets have had their detractors. They have also been lavish in their own praise as legislators of mankind, as purveyors of the only redeeming truth, and the like. But self-praise is rarely an adequate recommendation, and is often the ground for suspicion and mistrust. For this reason, I want to cite a single instance which persuades me that poets should be taken seriously, that a case should be made for the study for their works. The evidence I cite is that of Isaiah Berlin's account of the fate of Russian writers in the Great Purge. The purge itself was

heralded by the repression which followed the assassination of Kirov in 1934 and the notorious political show trials, and culminated in the Ezhov Terror of 1937-8, the wild and indiscriminate mowing down of individuals and groups, later of whole peoples.... The activities of informers and false witnesses exceeded all previously known bounds; self-prostration, false and wildly implausible confessions, bending before, or active cooperation with, authority, usually failed to save those marked for destruction. For the rest it left painful and humiliating memories from which some of the survivors of the Terror were never completely to recover....

Then came the German invasion, and the picture changed again. Such authors of distinction as had survived the Great Purge and had managed to retain their human semblance, responded passionately to the great wave of patriotic feelings. Some degree of truth returned to literature: war poems, not only those by Pasternak and Akhmatova, sprang from profound feeling.... An astonishing

phenomenon took place: poets whose writing had been regarded with disfavour by the authorities and who had consequently been published rarely and in very limited editions, began to receive letters from soldiers at the fronts, as often as not quoting their least political and most personal lines. I was told that the poetry of Blok, Bryusov, Sologub, Esenin, Tsvetaeva, Mayakovsky, was widely read, learnt by heart and quoted by soldiers and officers and even political commissars. Akhmatova and Pasternak, who had for a long time lived in a kind of internal exile, received an amazingly large number of letters from the front, quoting from both published and unpublished poems, for the most part circulated privately in manuscript copies; there were requests for autographs, for confirmation of the authenticity of texts, for expressions of the author's attitude to this or that problem...

Public readings by poets, as well as the reciting from memory of poetry at private gatherings and parties of all kinds, had been common in pre-revolutionary Russia; what was novel was a fact described to me by both Pasternak and Akhmatova, that when they read their poems before the vast audiences who packed assembly halls to hear them, and occasionally halted for a word, there were always scores of listeners present who prompted them at once -- with passages from works both published and unpublished (and in any case, not publicly available). No writer could help being moved or could fail to draw strength from this most genuine form of homage....³

The terrible years of terror and cultural commissars did not deter poets from pursuing their vocation, and they were sustained by vast numbers of ordinary people who, at no little cost to themselves, sought out their poems, and paid

them the highest tribute -- by liberating the poems in their memories. In the face of such evidence, who would deny that poets merit serious attention?

PROPOSITIO

Pindar celebrated Olympic victors; Virgil claimed to sing of arms and the man; Milton mourned the death of Lycidas; Sir Philip Sidney wooed Stella and resigned himself to the rejection of his suit. If we are to make sense of them as poets, let us redescribe poetry not as a series of objects, an infinity of artifacts, but as a manifestation or record of human conduct. Seen in this light, poetry is something we do. This is not a redefinition of poetry, but an attempt to revalidate the obvious by drawing attention to a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition which must hold if poems are to be possible. A poem must not "mean" or "be". It is, in the first place, an activity of a human agent (poets "do"), it is one of the ways in which we conduct ourselves -- or fail to, since we cannot make sense of conduct without also allowing for the possibility of failure and error. This I shall take as understood in all that follows.

DIVISIO

Ever since Plato took it upon himself to expel and then debar poets from his exclusive new republic, poets have humiliated themselves by trying to justify their readmission. It is strange that they have never paused to consider whether their undignified clamour for readmission is not simply a petulant intolerance of opposition. Plato's republic could well be an order of being that no self-respecting poet would want to be afflicted by, in any case. Be

that as it may, Plato set a condition of re-entry which he believed could never be met: poets should deliver truth, above all they should deliver truth by means of which we can orientate our perceptions towards the Good, and by that means know how to conduct our lives. In other words, poets must deliver knowledge which commands assent not only in terms of perception but also in terms which compel us to lead the Good Life. Honey-headed Plato always presents his noble ideal with the alluring eloquence of a spiritual patrician -- he is almost guilty of poetry himself. The same cannot be said for the vulgar, perhaps mythical, horde of *miso musoi*, the poet haters, who deceive themselves by the company they keep. Plato would have nothing but disdain for these intellectual troglodytes, but in essence they are his pupils when they ask, "What's the use of poetry?".

Our own pupils ask the same question, but not out of malice. They are genuinely puzzled by the endeavours of poets, and are even more bewildered by the ways in which we attend to them. They need a rationale which will justify and inform their pursuit of poetry. Going through the motions is not good enough. This means that if we are to fulfil our responsibilities as teachers we must respond to Plato's challenge. Failure to do so is a tacit admission that there is no real justification for what poets do. If there is no point to the activity of poetry, there is certainly no use for the study of it.

There are two very good reasons -- one theoretical, the other practical -- why Plato believes the condition he sets cannot be met. First, poetry is not, and cannot be, an order of knowing in the same way that the great architectonical disciplines such as philosophy, theology and even politics, or the lesser ones such as physics, biology and economics, have traditionally claimed to be. Poetry does not, by its nature, aim at organising knowledge with the intention of producing truth. Something to the effect that it does has at times been rashly claimed or rashly misunderstood as being claimed, and

there have been poets such as Lucretius whose purpose was to describe the nature of things; but if didactic poetry vanished from the face of the earth, the conduct of poetry would continue. On the other hand, if the disciplines abandoned their constitutive function of organising knowledge, philosophy, theology and the rest would cease to exist. Since poetry does not aim at organising knowledge, it is clear that Plato's condition amounts to the assertion that the apple of knowledge is not the pear of poetry. We can safely grant him that.

The second reason why Plato thinks his condition for re-entry cannot be met is the practical one which follows logically from the first: because poetry does not lead to an understanding of the Good, it follows that it cannot contribute to the Good Life. Having rejected Plato's initial assumption that poetry should lead to an understanding of the Good; in other words, having disallowed the relevance of his theory of knowledge, because poetry does not necessarily aim at delivering knowledge, we are not impelled to admit the consequence that poetry cannot contribute to human wellbeing. There are indeed ways unimagined by Plato in which poetry is beneficial; they have only to be articulated. This line of argument is the traditional way in which Plato's banishment is repudiated by defenders of poetry; it is a simple outflanking manoeuvre which points out that his initial assumptions aren't valid. Some poets, of course, disdain to give him even the time of day, or to let him stand between them and the sun; they defiantly say things such as "A poem should not mean / But be";⁴ or admit in one line of a poem that "poetry makes nothing happen", and a little later in the same poem instruct the poet: "In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise".⁵ Others are less cynical about the authority of philosophers, and so they are prepared to demonstrate a faith in the accomplishments of poetry. In his "Archaic Torso of Apollo",⁶ Rilke suggests that a work of art has sufficient authority to

demand that we transform our lives. The last words of the poem are: "You must change your life". Because he does this in a poem, and because the sculpture is a representation of Apollo, the god of poetry, the implication is that poetry also makes the same demands.

I should add in passing that, like all articles of faith, this belief in the transformative power of art is not easily sustained. In his most recent and, perhaps, most successful film, *Another Woman*, Woody Allen allows the central character to revise her conduct in terms of this Rilke poem. Unfortunately, Allen does not evince the same faith in his own art as he appears to advocate by means of it. Because he will not allow his films to be shown in this country, his actions undermine and trivialise his own best efforts. Ultimately, he does not believe that art can change people. Such irresolution is an embarrassing hindrance to the cause I want to plead.

If one starts with the postulate that poetry is a form of human conduct, not a form of knowledge, Plato's discriminations (and so their implications for the study of poetry) are false and inappropriate. Simply by relocating the logical site of poetry in this way, the Platonic argument is revealed as systematically misleading. A different range of categories is seen as appropriate. It is this range of categories which allows us to account for the relationship between poetry and human wellbeing.

To see how this could be the case, one needs to start by explaining and justifying the claim that poetry is first and foremost a form of human conduct, because if this claim is valid one need not seek any further reason for the study of poetry. The fact that it is something that people do, that it is a practice in terms of which they conduct themselves, provides sufficient justification. But I want to make further, stronger claims. The nature of poetic practice, the kind of conduct it is, requires us to understand it as more than something which people happen to be involved in. First, poetry

needs to be seen as one of those forms of conduct which constitute us as human beings; without practices such as poetry, we could not regard ourselves as fully human. Second, poetry, in common with certain other practices, is one of the ways in which we disclose the self-understandings, the values and conceptual horizons in terms of which we conduct ourselves as human agents. Third, poetry is a form of directed conduct inviting, indeed requiring, understanding and response; it is something others seek out, pursue.

Having argued that the nature of poetry has to be conceived in terms of these particular aspects of human conduct, I want to suggest that this justifies at least two ways in which poetry can be studied. In the first place, we study it as we do anything that is not part of us or our self-understandings -- in order to appropriate it by entering into it as a practice, or in order to understand it as an unfamiliar way of life. In the second place, we study it as something already understood which we now want to give an account of.

EXAMINATIO

If we have to talk about the things people do, we cannot talk about them simply as events that happen. Human conduct does not consist of bits of behaviour or responses to external causes. We cannot make sense of human conduct simply by treating it as a Pavlovian response to a stimulus. Attending a lecture is not the same in kind as a knee-jerk. This is because human conduct makes sense only if we accept that human agents are self-interpreting animals. We do the things we do, in the way we do them, because of what we understand ourselves to be. Thus attending a lecture, let alone an inaugural lecture, only makes sense if we postulate that those involved in the occasion have a conception (or even a misconception) as to what they are doing. There are

many forms of life present at the time of a lecture, but only those who can make sense of themselves as attenders of lectures can be said to be attending the lecture. Some might well decide that they would rather be elsewhere, that being present is a mistake, or they might have thought that they were coming to a different event. Any other forms of life merely happen to be present.

In one way or another, everything we do is worth studying. This includes kicking the dog, being fascinated by the idea of black holes, falling in love, shop-lifting and being entertained by blood-sports such as fox-hunting and rugby. Whether such activities are trivial, distasteful or reprehensible is immaterial to the fact that they can, and should, be studied. (In fact, it could well be that the more objectionable some form of conduct is, the worthier it is of study. How else are we to eliminate it? In which case, there could be very good, but perverse, tactical reasons for joining the chorus of poet-haters.) The fact is that poetizing is something people have done, and continue to do, and as such it is no privileged singularity. We need to accept that it is a form of human conduct, and that the logic which we presuppose when we consider any other form of human conduct applies to it as well.

In this regard, by far the most important thing to realise is that poetizing is a culturally embedded way of life, a practice, an occupation -- a pursuit. It is not a simple activity such as thinking, speaking or writing. Nor is it something over and above praising, blaming, reviling, ridiculing, entertaining, celebrating, mourning, or meditating -- all of them poetic activities. Human beings are not doing two separate things when they express their feelings for a particular beloved: writing a poem *and* expressing their emotions. Writing the poem is one of the ways in which the love is expressed, manifested, realised or constituted. Poetizing is thus not some form of extraordinary behaviour, nor is it straightforwardly ordinary: it involves

doing ordinary things in a particular way. This means that it is something extraordinarily ordinary.

Clearly, if poetry is a peculiar way, or mode, of engaging in and presenting human conduct, something needs to be said about the nature and implications of conducting ourselves in this way, since it is in some sense set apart from other modes of conduct. Once again, I do not want to define what such a mode is. Instead, I want simply to locate it as one of several forms of human conduct, such as dancing, making music, landscaping a garden, getting dressed (as opposed to keeping warm and dry), feasting (as opposed to taking in nourishment), and playing any form of game or sport. What all these practices have in common is that they are, strictly speaking, unnecessary and "useless". But if all these unnecessary forms of conduct were eliminated, leaving only the necessities of survival -- the needs of nourishment, warmth, health and companionship we share with other animals -- we would no longer be able to conduct our lives in a manner which we regard as human. These practices, in one way or another, are constituent of human conduct as we know it. Without them no complete sense can be given to the idea of human conduct, to the idea of being human. Try to imagine a way of life necessarily bereft of all of these things. Consider whether it is state in which the participants could think of themselves as fully human agents, or as subjects of mere existence. We don't have to engage ourselves in any of these activities, but if we could engage in none of them we would lose a sense of what it is to be human. Poetry is one of those activities, perhaps even one of the most important ones, whose existence manifests or constitutes our sense of ourselves as human. In other words, it is not simply a practice which all cultures *happen* to engage in. This can be put more strongly: being human entails that we belong to a culture necessarily, though not sufficiently, constituted by a practice of poetry.

We can now proceed to the second claim, that more than simply a practice constitutive of our sense of being human, poetry is one of those practices in terms of which participants establish for themselves a particular sense of what it is to be human. This is because such practices are freely undertaken. We do the things we want to do, without compulsion. In so doing, we enact the sense we have of what it is we understand ourselves to be: the practices we engage in, and the way in which engage in them, reveal what we regard as important for us as human beings. In other words, these practices are ways in which we, not as individuals but as self-interpreting animals, are enabled to push back the primal darkness and clear a space in the inchoate unknowable for us to inhabit.

In the particular case of poetry, the claim can be made even stronger, since poetic conduct proceeds, in the first instance, in terms of language. Without language we cannot be constituted as human agents. From this we can proceed to the audacious claim that poetry can with some justice be thought of as the primary way in which we are engaged in conduct that manifests what it is we take ourselves to be.

This leads to the third claim. Poetic conduct does not just clear privately understood space for the poet to inhabit. It clears public space, and does so in a way that invites understanding and response. This is part of the contract we accept when we enter into any practice. Thus a poet mourning the death of a friend locates an understood space accessible to anyone else. For example, "Lycidas" is Milton's response to the challenge of untimely death, that of Edward King. Had he chosen to respond in any other way, our cultural repertoire, our own resources for apprehending and comprehending the outrage of early death, would be severely depleted. Instead, he chose to engage the inner sense of that complex experience by means of the outwardly accessible practice of poetry. We therefore have directly available to us his

understanding of himself coming to terms with the experience. It is self-understandings of this kind, shaped in terms of the practice of poetry, that we seek out and value.

A more recent instance of the way in which poems enable public space can be found in the following passage from Patrick Leigh Fermor's account of his early poetic self-education:

The other chief Romans [apart from Virgil and Lucan] were Catullus and Horace: Catullus...because the young are prone (at least I was) to identify themselves with him when feeling angry, lonely, misunderstood, besotted, ill-starred or crossed in love. I probably adored Horace for the opposite reason; and taught myself a number of the Odes and translated a few of them into awkward English sapphics and alcaics. Apart from their other charms, they were infallible mood-changers. (One of them -- I. ix. *Ad Thaliarchum* [a poem of friendship] -- came to my rescue in strange circumstances a few years later. The hazards of war landed me among the crags of occupied Crete with a band of Cretan guerrillas and a captive German general whom we had waylaid and carried off into the mountains three days before. The German garrison of the island were in hot, but luckily temporarily misdirected, chase. It was a time of anxiety and danger; and for our captive, of hardship and distress. During a lull in the pursuit, we woke up among the rocks just as a brilliant dawn was breaking over the crest of Mount Ida. We had been toiling over it, through snow and then rain, for the last two days. Looking across the valley at this flashing mountain-crest, the general murmured to himself:

Vides ut alta stet nive candidum

Soracte...

It was one of those I knew! I continued from where he had broken off:

nec jam sustineant onus

Silvae laborantes, geluque

Flumina constiterint acuto,

and so on, through the remaining five stanzas to the end. The general's blue eyes had swivelled away from the mountain-top to mine -- and when I'd finished, after a long silence, he said: "Ach so, Herr Major!" It was very strange. As though, for a long moment, the war had ceased to exist. We had both drunk at the same fountains long before; and things were different between us for the rest of our time together.)⁷

The poem in terms of which Horace had conducted his friendship two millennia earlier became part of the repertoire in terms of which two people separately understood themselves, and so in turn became the locale, the open ground, the commonage, which enabled the recognition of a shared self-understanding in uncomprehending foes.

Until now, we have been considering poetic conduct in its ideal, unestranged state, as something effortlessly engaged in by the poet and immediately understood by anyone else. In this enchanted, paradissally infantile state the only explaining that needs to be done is that of the master instructing the apprentice in the skills of being a poet. We learn how to *do* poetry, in much the same way as we commonly imagine ourselves learning to conduct our lives in terms of a language. Unfortunately, this ideal is only for our imaginings. As self-understanders we do not simply proceed along the lines of self-understanding inculcated by our parents: we grow to choose between understandings, we change our understandings, and we change the very nature of those understandings. What we do is therefore not always transpar-

ent either to ourselves or to others. This can be particularly true of poets who at times deliberately constitute new clearings. It is also invariably true of the poetic conduct of people of different times and places. We may not know that they are innovators of public space, but we know that the space they make is not our own. We thus have the first condition of poetry requiring study: like all other practices it has a history. We need to find ways of entering the public space constituted by our own, not fully apprehended, way of life, or by that of another human agent's way of life and self-understandings. We want access to spaces of which we are the natural heirs, as well as to spaces other than our own. The realisation that this access is gained not simply by learning a language, and then listening to, or reading it, is articulated by the poet, Vikram Seth, in his travel book, *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet*.

As I listen to the sounds outside, it strikes me that although I know a certain amount about the language, literature and history of China, I am appallingly ignorant about the songs, the lullabies, the nursery rhymes, the street games of children, the riddles; all the things that are most important in the childhood of Chinese people. Chinese language courses do not include this; indeed, how could they be expected to? Yet without such things one cannot understand the wealth of references made to a common past, the casual assumptions of shared experiences that lie behind conversation in any language. It is like knowing *Macbeth* without knowing "Three Blind Mice", or the *Ramayana* without "Chanda Mama".⁸

If the purpose of study is to gain access to such already understood locations of being, it is the task of teachers to facilitate such access. Whether the motive for gaining access is to approach as nearly as possible to some naive, effortless transparency, so that the space is appropriated as our

own, or whether it is simply to engage our understandings with those of another, so that we know where they are, is not relevant here. What is relevant is that such studying is a difficult, but fully justified, task. What makes it particularly difficult is that there is no neutral space from which we can enter; nor can we insert ourselves invisibly without to some extent transforming what we have entered into. We bring the conditions of our already lived space with us, and for this reason have always to take account of the equivalent of mother-tongue interference. The last thing a poem provides is a view from nowhere,⁹ because by its very nature it insists on being a view from somewhere. A poem will therefore always defeat the intelligence which pretends to a clandestine, anonymous view. It is simply false that a knowledge of English or German qualifies us to speak with authority about a Shakespeare or a Rilke sonnet. Nevertheless, whether we want to take to heart the archaic torso's injunction in the Rilke poem ("You must change your life"), or whether we are satisfied with the realisation that some other human being has set store by such transformation, is less important than that by study we can enable the engagement from which such responses as appropriation or disinterested attention arise.

In the process we could also come to realise something about our own present, understood location: how it differs from others, or perhaps how impoverished and impoverishing it is. Poems read us as much as we read them. This may be illustrated by Samuel Johnson's dismissal of Milton's "Lycidas". Amongst other things, Johnson said, "In this poem there is no nature, for there is no truth; there is no art, for there is nothing new.... He who thus grieves will excite no sympathy; he who thus praises will confer no honour". He also said of the poem that "its form is that of a pastoral; easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting"¹⁰ -- by which he meant that it was commonplace and boring. (This alone should alert to the fact that we have as little direct

understanding of Johnson as he has of Milton.) Johnson's opacity makes no sense unless we realise that his array of self-understandings, the sense he has of what it is to be human, is very different from that of Milton. When we see how Johnson responds to the death of his friend Robert Levet, it is clear that his vigorous personal response to bereavement would not be accommodated in the Miltonic zone. The poem begins:

Condemned to Hope's delusive mine,
 As on we toil from day to day,
 By sudden blasts, or slow decline,
 Our social comforts drop away.

Well tried through many a varying year,
 See Levet to the grave descend;
 Officious, innocent, sincere,
 Of every friendless name the friend.

There is a further way in which poems are studied, one which cannot be separated from the activity of interpretation, but which should not be confused with it: we study something already understood (or provisionally understood) because we want to account for it. We want to know what constitutes it as a practice, what makes it possible. We want to discover in general, as well as in particular cases, what makes poetic conduct what it is, why it happens in one particular way rather than another. But we also want to know about the conditions of understanding involved in the first kind of study of poetry, that which aims at access to the conduct of poetry. When poems are studied in these ways it is not simply a matter of reading texts. It is an attempt bring to bear all possible intelligence on a specific area of human conduct, an area of conduct intimately concerned with the fundamental notions and values humans have of and for themselves. For example, we might want to

know what made Milton's monumental endeavour of *Paradise Lost* possible.

REFUTATIO

The refutation of the Platonic slander therefore lies in the acknowledgement that poetry does not compete with philosophy and history as a form of knowledge about what people do, for the simple reason that it is itself one of the things that people do. As such it can be a subject of knowledge, can be studied by historians and philosophers. Philosophers can even attempt to guide us as to whether particular instances or forms of poetic conduct are worthwhile and acceptable. We as individuals are quite free to engage not only in conducting ourselves in poetic modes, but also in the practices of understanding which such conduct presupposes. We can also be completely Philistine individuals, and see such conduct as trivial and useless. We can then even abandon our minds to the notion of extirpating this wasteful debility -- the consequence of this would be a self-inflicted lobotomy, since we would extirpate both the ways of life which constitute us as human beings, and the related practices of self-understanding. Philosophers, historians, scientists and accountants cannot efface the fact of being human which they bring with them in the conduct of their affairs. We are therefore all bearers of the domain of poetry. All truth-seekers tacitly presuppose what it is that poetry is concerned with -- the sense we have of what it is to be human. This is why poetry matters. This is why it is valued.

Poems do not tell us the truth. They constitute significant action which accommodates us to our sense of ourselves; and when we are the first, transparent understanders, their words constitute a stage for our self-interpreted condition, so that we think of ourselves as native to that condi-

tion. But we change our self-understandings, and the self-understandings available to us alter, and so the spaces which once satisfied us or our predecessors become obsolete, alien and tawdry, and we cannot inhabit them. We throw them away as a "thing of another time, / As morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep",¹¹ and prepare ourselves for the satisfaction of dwelling in the world of our own constituting. We seek out a stage and script, not because we want to observe someone else's understandings, but because stage and script can accommodate our sense of how we conduct our lives.

Even now there are those among us who are constituting or searching out those scripts which will accommodate them and us to the predicament of being human. For this reason it is perhaps worthwhile allowing a poet to tell us what a poem locating us in the present would be like.

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
 It has to face the men of the time and to meet
 The women of the time. It has to think about war
 And it has to find what will suffice. It has
 To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
 And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
 With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
 In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
 Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
 Of which, an invisible audience listens,
 Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
 In an emotion as of two people, as of two
 Emotions becoming one. The actor is
 A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
 An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives

Sounds passing through sudden rightness, wholly
 Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
 Beyond which it has no will to rise.¹²

We perpetually fall out of a state of primal innocence, and so we could be condemned to an incessant pandering to this craving for infantile, paradisaical satisfactions. That is the danger of poetry seen as an anodyne. To escape the passivity of a world constituted simply by our own needs, we have to understand ourselves as independent beings. This is when learning becomes the project of repairing the consequences of what comes to be seen as a fortunate fall, because we seek to understand the untransparent conduct of ourselves and of our fellow creatures. The poems of the past are thus not to be relegated to a repository of other people's souvenirs, they become the hard-won occasions for engaging our own experience with that of other human beings. We enter the conversation of what it is to be human.

PERORATIO

Because I have been concerned with the necessary conditions for attending to poems, not the sufficient ones, I might have disappointed some by failing to make any claims for the noble particularities of poetry. In consequence they would not feel compelled to go in pursuit of a poem -- except perhaps as a restorative. I should, of course, be saddened if this were the case, as I have been preoccupied with building-sites and foundations, if not the final dwellings and edifices. I would hope that at the very least you leave here willing to think differently about poetry. For this reason I shall allow a poet to remind you that while "One's grand flights, one's Sunday baths, / One's tootings at the weddings of the soul / Occur as they occur",¹³

we always need to bear in mind that poetry is irredeemably concerned with a sense of what it is to be human, something "below which it cannot descend / Beyond which it has no will to rise."¹⁴

Notes

¹ See Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), and "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind", in *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962), pp.197-247.

² Anthony O'Hear, *The Element of Fire: Science, Art and the Human World* (London: Routledge, 1988).

³ Isaiah Berlin, *Personal Impressions*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp.159-61.

⁴ Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica", lines 23-4.

⁵ W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1976), pp.197-8.

⁶ Rainier Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poems*, ed. and tr. Stephen Mitchell (London: Picador, 1987), p.61.

⁷ *A Time of Gifts* (London: John Murray, 1977), pp.73-4.

⁸ *From Heaven Lake* (London: Sphere Books, 1984), pp.84-5.

⁹ This expression for the aim of scientific endeavour is derived from Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Samuel Johnson, "Milton", *The Lives of the English Poets*, 2 vols., ed. Arthur Waugh (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), I,112-113.

¹¹ Wallace Stevens, "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction", I.ii.20-21, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954), p.222.

¹² Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954), pp.239-40.

¹³ Wallace Stevens, "The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man", lines 1-3, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954), p.22.

¹⁴ Wallace Stevens, "Of Modern Poetry", lines 22-3, *The Collected Poems*

(New York: Knopf, 1954), pp.239-40.