

THE WORD AND THE STONE

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Is dictust ollis popularibus olim
Qui tum vivebant homines atque aevum agitabant
Flos delibatus populi, Suadaeque medulla.

Quintus Ennius, quoted in the Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius,
Book XII, Section ii, 5.*

To be sure, the sculptor uses stone just as the mason uses it, in his own way. But he does not use it up. That happens in a certain way only where the work miscarries. . . . To be sure, the poet also uses the word — not, however, like ordinary speakers and writers who have to use them up, but rather in such a way that the word only now becomes and remains truly a word.

Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*

AS ROBERT SCHOLES COMMENTS in *Textual Power*, developing a theme we now associate with Russian Formalism but which is native to the Western literary tradition as a whole, “Much of our poetry has been written . . . to remove the veil of language that covers everything with a false familiarity.” The Romantics, as we know, embarked upon the same defamiliarizing project,¹ Coleridge remarking in the *Biographia* on Wordsworth’s noble attempt to strip the “film of familiarity” from our perception of the world and Shelley picking up the same phraseology in the *Defence*: “Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar.”²

The Romantics, of course, hold no monopoly on this restorative function of poetic language, which is an effect of the best poetry whenever it may be written. Dr. Johnson, commenting on the distinguishing qualities of Pope’s work in his *Life* of the poet, similarly observes with approval that “familiar things are made new.”³ Although today we speak of dehabitualization, ‘ostranenie,’ the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* or simply the A-effect, displacement, estrangement, and so on, modern formalism has basically articulated a standard and venerable insight into the essential nature of the poetic transaction with the world in a renovated (i.e., critically defamiliarized) idiom that enables us to grasp an old truth with renewed vigour. But the identical insight persist, from Plotinus in the 3rd century Neoplatonically

* He by his fellow citizens was called,
By every man who lived and flourished then,
The people’s chosen flower, Persuasion’s marrow.

affirming “that the arts do not simply imitate what they see” but reproduce the *logoi*, the original and pristine forms of the Creation, to the protocols of Imagism, Futurism and Formalism in our own time. One thinks of Pound and Williams strenuously “Mak[ing] it New,” Viktor Shklovsky exhorting us to “make the stone stoney.”⁴ (oddly reminiscent of Husserl’s famous cry, “Back to the things themselves!”), of Susan Sontag prescribing the recovery or the erotic rehabilitation of the senses through art, and J. L. Austin advocating the use of the abnormal to “throw light on the normal,” thus penetrating “the blinding veil of ease and obviousness . . .”⁵

But there is a complementary impetus as well in the Western tradition which asserts that poetic language finds its central purpose in purifying the dialect of the tribe, renovating the medium not only to enhance and clarify our perception of the world but to purge and intensify our relations with language itself. Mallarmé and Eliot are by no means theoretical pioneers in this regard and the preoccupation with language *per se* has always been an inalienable portion of the poet’s linguistic patrimony, as was recognized, for example, by Heidegger in his late essays when he defined the function of poetry as *an intercession on behalf of language*, the house of Being.⁶ These two aspects or moities of poetic practice are neatly summed up and paralleled in Michael Riffaterre’s distinction between the two forms or stages of reading, the “heuristic” in which signs function in a chiefly referential fashion, and the “retroactive” in which certain difficulties, obscurities, “ungrammaticalities,” that may arise in a text defeat a mimetic reading and require a new, *depre-conceptual* approach.⁷ Or as Scholes puts it in his comment on Shklovsky’s dictum about making stone stony, poetry may “at least make language itself visible . . . [that is] . . . make the word wordy.”

These are the two ideological poles, the limit points between which poetry has always shuttled and still continues to oscillate in its recognition of its own peculiar nature and purpose. It sets language in place between the frames of its margins like a clear pane through which we are meant to glimpse the problematic grandeur of existence. Or it presents us with a stained glass window which foregrounds its own colour and design, diffracting the light that irradiates the world outside in order to accentuate its own intrinsic luminescence.⁸ At one extreme, poetic language tends to efface itself, to become invisible, literally *unremarkable*, decarnalized, and to subordinate itself to the greater and more memorable discourse of the world to which it directs our attention;⁹ at the other extreme, the world itself fades toward the status of ghostly back-up or is, at least, *reduced* to offering the minimum support necessary to sustain the verbal artefact and allow it to be perceived. The most exorbitant formulation of this latter tendency is probably Alfred Döblin’s, “Poetry is categorically opposed to rational scribbling that is subordinated to external ends.”

Within this general bipolar context the poem takes up its position. But the meta-

phor of the window works only in so far as the poem moves conspicuously toward one or another of its limiting conditions. As soon as a poem is perceived as embodying *both* functions, the visual metaphor is probably best replaced by an aural one, in which the notion of harmony or counterpoint renders its dual nature with greater adequacy. For the great poems inevitably participate in both dimensions of our experience, situated in language that is constantly recuperating itself as something unique, memorable, noble, opihcleidic, resonating, and at the same time urging us outward toward the world in all its beauty and ugliness as something that demands our recognition and involvement. Great poetry is both *in language* and *in the world* simultaneously, dividing our attention into two complementary halves and then reuniting these halves stereoscopically or stereophonically so that our experience is one of depth or immersion. In such cases, form, style, period and all taxonomical considerations fall away, so that whether we are reading Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock, or Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence,' we find ourselves in the presence of a poem in which language and world, sound and sense, *logos* and *cosmos* are wedded and reciprocally amplified.¹⁰ We find ourselves, that is, moving in two directions at once without experiencing the disabling sense of contradiction — we are in the condition of dream — to arrive if only for a moment at the center of an exaltation, a reaffirmation of language and world in which neither is sacrificed for the sake of the other.

Thus, in the presence of the great poem we gradually become aware of an aspect of language that generally escapes our attention. The illumination of the world in all its fulness, that is, of our experience of the world in its rich multidimensionality, necessarily involves the *privileging of language in itself as well*. For language, complex and insoluble phenomenon that it is,¹¹ does not only reflect or influence the world, thus fulfilling an exclusively agential function. It is also *a part of the world* in which we live, as 'real,' as objective, as manifest as mountains, dreams, dictatorships, diseases, weather, tables, sunsets and curbstones. It has not only an instrumental significance but enjoys an ontological status as well. And it is the peculiar and historical nature of poetic discourse to inflect this double nature of language as both tool and object, implement and substance, *at the same time*. When language proceeds to blue-pencil itself, disappearing effortlessly into its function, it may succeed in opening a portion of the world to our inspection but it obscures and suppresses another equally vital aspect of our experience — in fact, precisely that which distinguishes the mind from the animal plenitude of the Creation. Heidegger tells us that the malfunctioning tool, the breakdown of equipment, restores our awareness of Being by startling us out of the sleep of smooth functioning.¹² The *success* of language in drawing attention, not only to the world but to itself (and thus, to ourselves as well), is equivalent on the ontological plane to the *failure* of equipment: it restores a significant portion of the world and the intrinsic stratum of our existence to our attention. (Or what amounts to the same thing: the success

of language on the ontological plane is predicated on the failure of language as equipment, that is, language on the *purely* instrumental or utilitarian plane.) When poetic language commits what C. S. Lewis calls “vericide,” profaning its high or scansorial nature, it does not go alone but takes an innocent victim along with it, a constitutive element of *both* the poem and the world which is lost in the sleep of eudaimonistic or functional efficiency.

The claim that poetry violates its historical nature and its constitutive value by dispossessing language *qua* language or rendering it transparent does not imply that it fulfills its ‘mandate’ by going to the opposite extreme of rhetorical opacity or by a programmatic thickening of its lexical pigmentation. A language that delights mainly in expressing an ultimate inexpressibility, not disappearing tamely into the inaudible hum of function but congealing grumously into substance, shutting out the world by virtue of its own precedent visibility, produces a poetry that is distressing once again for its onesidedness. (However indiscriminately we employ the acoustic and pictorial metaphors here, the point remains equally well or ill taken. The poet’s slam-dunking his words phonetically on the page or splashing them about with tachiste abandon amounts to the same thing — an attack of disabling lexemia.) Swinburnian excess is no antidote to metalinguistic transparency. The poet who emphasizes the wordiness of the word, the sheer facticity of language, at the expense of a non-discursive subject, of theme or passion or insight, comes to resemble Swift’s nonplussed geographer in ‘On Poetry’ who, poring over an empty map of Africa, places elephants for want of towns. It *should* be clear that poetic language is — to continue the metaphor — an elephant one rides *on the way* to the town and that the poet is not only a (Swiftian) geographer but a mahout as well.

Thus, when Yeats writes in ‘The Man And The Echo’ :

Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?

he is turning to account the double nature of poetic language. On the one hand, the poem directs our notice to a significant issue *outside* the poem, to an event in the world which the poem reflects and about which the poet reflects, broods, meditates; on the other hand, metre, rhyme and the sense of strong verbal charge draw attention to the lines themselves *as language* consciously manipulated *inside* the poem. The attention which the poem calls to itself establishes it as an inalienable part of the larger event which it both queries and describes, adding to its complexity and underscoring its composite, multi-layered, interrogative force. It is precisely this curious, dream-like sense of being in two places at once, both inside the poem minding its language and outside the poem reconstructing the event toward which it points, that accounts for its acknowledged power to move us and perhaps even to change us.

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH-LANGUAGE poetry has by and large forfeited the power to move by its determined attempt to factor language out of the poetic equation.¹³ It is not *on the whole* a poetry which insists on its status as word and it no longer tends to define itself, as Derek Attridge says in *Peculiar Language*, “in terms of its difference from natural language.” As it converges increasingly on the idiom and cadence of prose and, even further, begins to echo the flat, indolent and anonymous rhythms of normative speech, it proceeds to obliterate the *objectivity* and *viability* of language as an essential and miraculous part of the larger world which it presumably describes, questions, opposes or underwrites. The poem begins to disappear into its subject, drawing away from itself, sacrificing its own incommutable nature as noble or memorable ‘speech’ and thus paradoxically impoverishing the experience it is intended to clarify or enhance. Especially is this the case in contemporary Canadian poetry in which many of our most talented writers, in bringing us close to the object of their concern, render their language transparent and inoperative as language *in itself*. It is almost as if the very intensity of their feelings, the depth and legitimacy of their preoccupations, their moral integrity as such has dimmed the vitality and power of the language in which they are constrained to work — a language which has fallen victim to the enormity of the event whose distance from the imagination has been effectively cancelled. When Michael Harris in his award-winning ‘Turning Out The Light’ brings us almost bodily, as it seems, to the bedside of his cancer-stricken brother and allows us to watch him die, the horror and pathos, utterly genuine as they may be, proceed to bury a poem which has just died before our eyes, turning out the light on its existence *as a poem*. Most readers are not aware of this because they are not aware of the poem. The poem has abolished itself as language and thus effaced language itself for the space of our reading as that part the world which transcends its occasion. I am not suggesting that certain themes and subjects should be proscribed as too dangerous, too ‘real’ for poems to handle safely, but rather that the poem should simultaneously demand recognition *as a poem* in the face of even the most outrageous and irreducible of experiences — as does, for example, Dylan Thomas’ ‘Do Not Go Gentle,’ villanelling its way past its subject in order to *centralize* itself as a linguistic and aesthetic artefact. Otherwise it is deprived of its distinctive mode of existence as poetry and can be readily assimilated to anything else that works as well in re-enacting or transmitting the experience it confronts: effective journalism, moving prose, intense or persuasive conversation, psychotropic telepathy. But when Irving Layton writes of the death of his mother in ‘Keine Lazarovitch,’ the reader may suffer an induced vicarious anguish, find himself quite literally moved to tears, and re-approach the poem only in fear and trembling. At the same time *the poem affirms its own existence as a poem* and continues to resonate verbally in

the imagination, surviving the death which it mourns by virtue of its 'peculiar language' — lines like "the inescapable lousiness of growing old," "how / She had loved God but cursed extravagantly his creatures.," and "her youngest sings / While all the rivers of her red veins move into the sea.," insisting on their own poetic autonomy as *lines*, as a collocation of memorable and glorious *words*. The poem has refused to surrender to the mortality which it laments.

Or considering the scandal and terror of dictatorship as described in Gary Geddes' recent *No Easy Exit*, once again I find my response troubled and somehow devitalized. It may seem frivolous to lodge an objection to poetic technique in the face of the manifest horrors perpetrated in Pinochet's Chile and recorded in the poems in this collection, yet the *literary* response is an integral part of the total experience of which 'the poem' is both catalyst and medium. Emerging from a reading of the book, I am overwhelmed by disgust and indignation at the events transcribed therein but somehow unmoved by the poetry — very much as with some of the work of Carolyn Forché (especially her Salvadorian "Return"). The poet is invisibly present throughout as an honest and sensitive observer, as an authentic conscience, and the depth of his moral concern must affect even the most callous of his readers. But — possibly as just such a callous reader — I have almost no recollection of any of the words and lines of which the poems are constructed. I retain certain images and sensations but I retain none of the poems. I am aware that the poet may take precisely this seizure of linguistic amnesia as an indication of the success of the book, but once again I stress that such an effect is producible in many other ways that have nothing to do with the peculiar nature and power of poetic language, including a visit to Chile. What is going on inside the poem does not appear able to escape the gravitational radius of the event horizon into which it has plunged. As does not happen, for instance, with Wilfred Owen who, recording the horror of war from the trenches, about as close up as one can get, will conclude:

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

— giving us in this poem not only a vivid and immediate representation of a soldier in a gas-attack "gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs" but also a skilful and perhaps even magisterial deployment of poetic language in which two Latin words are made to march in English military rhyme, another line ("To children ardent for some desperate glory") which imprints itself indelibly upon the memory, and a clever hemistich which brings the entire piece to a cold, blank, snapped-off closure that echoes on ironically in the imagination in aftertones as moving and significant as Hopkins' latreutic "Praise Him":

The reader finds himself inhabiting a very different *poetic* territory when he turns to the works of Geddes and Harris which I have singled out for consideration.¹⁴ For example, the former's "Little Windows":

a number killed at the air-base
 others thrown into the sea
 from helicopters, stomachs opened

 When they break her eyes
 images remain.
 Sound of the helicopter
 recedes. Sea is a window
 above him, water
 tongues the red from his stomach.

or the latter's "Turning Out The Light":

He is tired of the shame
 of wetting his bed; he wants
 the wheelchair toilet . . .

 Even the sound of the softly opening door
 has him cry and gag
 on the dregs of his vomit . . .

 The morning drip
 eases red cells
 into the bloated arm.

— in which individual words, lines and stanzas melt into their correlative circumstances, dissolving into the experience rather than crystallizing out of it. More to the point, however, is the general *cumulative* effect of the longer sequences, in which the pain, the anguish, the sense of magnitude experienced by the reader even at a second remove erase the poems *qua* poems from his awareness and may equally be said to sublimate the poems from themselves. When the distance from the recorded event is collapsed, the awareness of language, the distinctive essence of the poem, is also wiped out. Whereas in reading the previously cited poems of Yeats or Owen or Layton a paradoxical *linguistic joy* is felt to accompany the sense of sombre empathy evoked by these pieces, owing to our recognition of a certain aesthetic control, a self-conscious lexical and architectonic mastery. It is almost as if the voluptuous delight the poet takes in his mastery of words is communicated directly to the reader, who cannot help but share in a sort of lexical radiation of pleasure.

It is the *linguistic* effort to establish the poem's countervailing reality, its gritty, heteronomous respoken of the world — an effort which enables us to recognize not only the subject or the event but the aesthetic object as well — that generates the composite experience we insist on coming back to, on remembering, on *delight-*

ing in despite what may be its frightful or melancholy theme. Without this peculiar species of reality-matching, of linguistic equity or cardinality, the poem ceases to exist as a poem and becomes something else, a pure transparency, a verbal enzyme, a form of cinematic immediacy. It is, strangely enough, as if such writing fulfils the condition of the good translation, which succeeds best when it disappears entirely from view. What this sort of 'poetic language' gives us, in effect, is a *translation* rather than a complementary and autonomous *aspect* of the real. But the defining and promethean claim of all genuine poetic language is simply that it is as real in its own stubborn, energetic way as the real itself. Or to change the metaphor, if the poem moves across in its entirety from its status as language to take up its position in or *directly beside* its subject, then discourse and event find themselves on the same side of the diegetic seesaw — depriving the work, as well as the reader, of that strange and distinctive sense of aesthetic exhilaration we associate with good poetry. This soaring emotion may have something to do with the tragic function of all serious art, the Lapis Lazuli vision of the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, but it need not flow from anything so philosophically austere as Aristotelian catharsis. The reaction of delight or euphoria in the presence of works treating of catastrophic subjects may strike the more ethically rigorous as disturbingly sadistic, but the skilful or Magian deployment of the aesthetic medium induces that sense of wonder, appreciation and joy which enables the mind to resist sentimentality or despair.¹⁵ And the aesthetic medium in which poetry moves and has its being is, after all, language in all its resident complexity. The poem, then, as it confronts its subject, attempts to make not itself but the world transparent, accessible to meaning, communicable, *it tries to make the stone wordy*. Concurrently, in rendering its theme with all the resources at its disposal — rhythm, image, form, tone, and especially diction (or what Edward Said calls "linguicity," an all-inclusive category) — it tries to render not the world but itself as solid, lapidary, mosaic, or, if one likes, as *Demosthenean* as the rhetoric of enunciation permits, *it tries to make the word stony*.¹⁶ And both at the same time.

Thus when I read Yeats, Owen, Layton, my response to the solemnity of the events called forth by the poems is not diminished but enhanced by my complementary appreciation of the language manipulated on the page. Such an experience is rich and complex, deepened by the consummate verbal skill which does not only articulate itself *in vacuo* but *preserves the event* as well,¹⁷ preventing it from dispersing with the inevitable gasses of an immediate visceral reaction. This is the paradox of poetic language¹⁸ which preserves the world only if it survives its occasion as belonging to the world about which it writes, in which it is written, and of which it forms an indissoluble part as an object of writing. But poets in the English tradition today, with a few notable exceptions, have tended to succumb to the ideology of the real, betraying language in its poetic or *aculeated* function in order to honour a commitment to 'fact' or to the 'real' as it impinges upon the

personality. In contemporary Canadian verse especially, the stone has battered the word into a condition of insensibility, as even the merest acquaintance with our recent productions should make distressingly clear. But it would be a mistake to assume that language must necessarily falter and submit before reality, glumly reconciling itself to a harsh, rupicolous existence. Amidst the upheavals and sufferings of a country very much subject to the depredations of the reality principle, the work of George Seferis, for example, sensuous, digraphic, and superbly crafted, continues to be read and recited *as poetry*, as much for the language it commands within the poems as for the experience it invokes and memorializes outside them — as if in proof of the children’s game in which paper always covers stone:

“Όπου και να ταξιδέψω ή ‘Ελλάδα μέ πληγώνει.

Στό Πήλιο μέσα στις καστανιές τò πουκάμισο τού Κεν-
ταύρου
γλιστροῦσε μέσα στά φύλλα για να τυλιχτεί στό κορμί
μου
καθώς άνέβαινα την άνηφόρα κι’ ή θάλασσα μ’ άκολου-
θοῦσε
άνεβαίνοντας κι’ αύτη σαν τόν ύδράργυρο θερμομέτρου
ώς πού να βροῦμε τά νερά τού βουνού. * ¹⁹

Although the best poetry will avoid both ends of the sliding scale of its performative ambience, the petrifactive and the verbifactive,²⁰ it understands, intuitively or consciously, that a strong, lithic, corrugated language is what distinguishes its own existence as poetry and that such language remains an integral part of the world it addresses. “With good authors,” writes Alfred Döblin in a less doctrinaire moment, “language always wins.”

* Wherever I may travel Greece wounds me.

On Pelion under the chestnut trees the Centaur’s shirt
glided through the leaves to wind about my body
as I climbed the slope and the sea followed me
ascending like mercury in a thermometer
until we found the waters of the mountain.

NOTES

- ¹ See Robert Scholes’ *Structuralism in Literature* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974) for a thoroughgoing discussion of the subject.
- ² See Craig Raine’s ‘A Martian Sends A Postcard Home’ for a contemporary example of this defamiliarizing procedure. Raine’s poem, however, is compromised by a conceptual flaw: the Martian, who knows neither what a book is nor the common

- word 'book' (he compares books to birds and refers to them, oddly enough, as 'Caxtons') is nevertheless quite at home with the adjective 'bookish' and the verb 'read.'
- ³ Johnson was with his usual astuteness commenting on the *double* function of metaphor, which constitutes "the two most engaging powers of an author. New things are made familiar, and familiar things are made new." Formalism does not for obvious reasons focus on the first or *domesticating* function of metaphor.
- ⁴ Cf. Mandelstam's extraordinary book of poems, *Stone*.
- ⁵ Austin's work is pointedly applicable here, especially his essay 'A Plea for Excuses.' In fact, the value of his work in this connection is triply relevant, as it not only compels us to reconsider the ways in which language negotiates the world but to refresh our awareness of the ways of language itself; and finally and inadvertently, its deconstruction at the hands of Derrida tends to place that renewed understanding in an even stranger, more auroral light.
- ⁶ See the *Attic Nights* (London: Heinemann/Loeb Classics, 1927) of Aulus Gellius (c. A.D. 123-170), which is devoted in large part to the study of etymologies and the right use of words in Latin poetry to avoid the twin perils of the ridiculous and the redundant. The erudite and belletristic Gellius provides an extreme example, perhaps, of the philological preoccupation, but the study of the right use and application of poetic language as such runs from classical antiquity through the entire Western literary tradition. Interestingly, the twin attitudes I am discussing here, the emphatics of Shem and Shaun, were already represented for the Romans by two emblematic personalities, Gellius on the one hand and on the other, the polymathic Terentius Varro whose study of literature stressed the primacy of subject matter. In the words of R. M. Ogilvie (cf. *Roman Literature And Society* New York: Penguin, 1980), Gellius manifested "a very different attitude from that of Varro, who searched earlier writers for knowledge."
- ⁷ The by now standard distinction between metaphor and metonymy is not appropriate to our discussion, as the language/world polarity cuts right across such topological discriminations. Though metaphorical language, especially in its more 'conceited' forms, tends to draw attention to itself, to revel in its conspicuousness, it does not follow that metonymical language is necessarily self-obliterating. See David Lodge's discussion in *The Modes of Modern Writing* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1977) of Forster's *A Passage to India* for a good example of how the principle of contiguity or linearity can generate a rich and *apparently* metaphorical language. The polarity we are working with is more a question of the writer's focus, attitude, instinct or interior 'set' toward his material.
- ⁸ See Robert Hillyer's *In Pursuit of Poetry* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960) for a rather different application of the metaphor of the stained glass window. Hillyer identifies the poet *in himself* with "the stained glass window that transmits sunlight just as ordinary windows do, but colors it as it passes through. And the poet should rest content with that; no man is great enough to be both the window and the sunlight."
- ⁹ The world as 'discourse' is, of course, an idea with a respectable pedigree in Neoplatonism, in the Smaragdine Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus, the doctrine of 'signatures' in Boehme, the 'correspondences' of Swedenborg, and the poetry of Blake, Hopkins and Yeats.
- ¹⁰ I use the nuptial metaphor advisedly, as if to say: poetry cannot celebrate its complex marriage with the world unless it pursues at the same time its love affair with language. There is no question of infidelity here, but the mature sufficiency of an 'Italian' arrangement.

More seriously, this relation of language and reality should not be misconstrued as a Hegelian dialectic of reciprocal negation or as implicated in the workings of a deconstructive strategy in which the one undoes its representation of the other. Rather the relation is one of mutual subsumption, perhaps even of mutual need. Poetic language, in fact, is the authenticating imprint, the ISBN number of the Real, which is at the same time and paradoxically an *event* in itself, thus demanding its registration in consciousness and memory.

- ¹¹ I often think of language not only as a phenomenon but more particularly as a *phonemenon*.
- ¹² The same idea *mutatis mutandis* which Tolstoy develops in *The Death of Ivan Illyich*.
- ¹³ Some notable current exceptions: James Merrill, Joseph Brodsky and Sharon Olds in the U.S.; Seamus Heaney (in part) and Medbh McGuckian in the U.K.
- ¹⁴ I wish to go on record here and state that Harris and Geddes are, in my estimation, both excellent poets, among the finest of their generation in this country, and in their best work manage to stay clear of what I am calling 'the ideology of the real,' word succumbing to stone. See, for example, Harris' "The Gamekeeper," "Uncle Edward," and "The Dolphin" (from *In Transit*, Montreal: Signal, 1985) among many others, and Geddes' *The Terracotta Army* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1984). I have chosen to subject some of their poems to critical scrutiny here *precisely because* they have, as poets, produced an impressive body of work. If *their* work has in part failed to resist realistic petrification, what shall we say of their confrères? (I cannot refrain from suggesting, however, that Michael Estok's praise of Geddes, recorded on the book's last page — namely, that the poet's elegiac power "puts him on the same level of poetic intensity (perhaps he surpasses it) of Milton's "Lycidas" and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*" — may be a trifle premature.)

The essential drift of my argument, however, has to do with *tendencies*. Owen and Thomas, for example, have produced a certain amount of undistinguished work in which the language element may appear flat, archaic, tedious, redundant. But the perceptible effort or *nisus*, more often than not successful, is toward that "intercession on behalf of language" which renders their work memorable *on the whole*. The corresponding tendency in contemporary English-language poetry is toward the intervention on behalf of the world, at the expense of linguistic specificity, which produces that strange quality of anonymity or transparency to which the *works themselves* generally succumb.

- ¹⁵ The experience of aesthetic joy seems to be regularly misunderstood by professional philosophers. I refer not only to Aristotle's emetic theory of tragedy but to Kant's Third Critique in which the pleasure of "fiction" is interpreted in the somewhat naive sense of displacement therapy, as if art were a universal Recreation Center, part of the Sunday pottery syndrome. "We entertain ourselves with it when experience becomes too commonplace," writes the renowned Königsberger, solemnly insensible to the jocoserious (to quote Joyce, who got the word from Browning's *Jocoseria* of 1883) enchantment of the mind produced by the aesthetic medium. The aesthetic pleasure has a serious cognitive function in helping us face up to and not merely circumvent or betray our experience of reality. It *braces* the mind, opposing both the insidiousness of sentimental diffusion and the paralysis of radical despair. As Browning writes in 'Ixion' from the *Jocoseria* volume:

What is the influence, high o'er Hell, that turns to a rapture
Pain — and despair's murk mists blend in a rainbow of hope?

- ¹⁶ Such language gives the impression of concrete *entasis*, pleasing because it convinces us of the poem's solidity, the words bulging under the compressive stresses that support its deposition — like Doric columns.
- ¹⁷ Or in the antinomial formulation of Jean Baudrillard, the language we manipulate is not simply that of analysis: "it seeks to preserve the enigma of the object through the enigma of discourse." We must resist the temptation of defining and relating to the object as "the subject's mode of disappearance." (See *The Ecstasy of Communication*.) Interestingly, Baudrillard's warning works as an updated, linguistic, (and defamiliarized) version of Augustine's *concupiscentia oculorum*, the temptation of *seeing* rather than experiencing, which is also taken up in Mallarmé's famous quip that "all poetry has gone wrong since the great Homeric deviation." Eliot would seem to date this 'deviation' somewhat later, though the idea remains:

Where shall the word be found, where will the word
Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence . . .

- ¹⁸ What I am here calling 'poetic language' the American poet, Oscar Mandel, denominates simply as "music," which, Mandel writes in his *The Book of Elaborations* (New York: New Directions, 1985), "signifies a patrician order of words victorious over words as amiable rabble." When "stern structure and high music" go out of poetry, what is left is a typical combination of "slouch in the form, bric-à-brac for the matter, and decayed statement in the message . . ."
- ¹⁹ The test of recitation strikes me as a telling one, and one moreover which has nothing to do with the phonocentric impulse, the privileging of voice over writing, that Derrida has made a career out of deconstructing. What moves us tends to seek utterance, to outer itself. This is a fact of whatever 'nature' we may still be said to possess in our deconstructive and psychocritical times — to which, for example, any non-celibate may persuasively attest. But the vast proportion of our poetic productions is perfectly compatible with an encrypting silence. I have rarely seen or heard anyone among my literary acquaintances in this country joyfully or compulsively *reciting* the work of their contemporaries, whereas in Greece I have listened to hotel clerks and restaurateurs movingly declaim passages from Seferis, Elytis and Gatsos. This is not because — or *only* because — the Greeks may happen to be a more lyrical and effusive people than we are, but because — or *also* because — their poets still tend to write a more incantatory, significant and *linguistically compelling* poetry than ours. (Two Nobel prizes for poetry in one generation may not be an accident.) This property of their verse will often come across even in translation. One need not, of course, cede this privilege or monopoly exclusively to the Greeks. I think of the work of Yehuda Amichai and Abraham Sutzkever in Israel, Gaston Miron, Sylvain Garneau and Jacques Brault in Quebec, Eugenio Montale, Mario Luzi and Valerio Magrelli in Italy, and anyone familiar with other languages and traditions will readily come up with similar examples. The point remains, however, that a certain kind of poetry tends spontaneously to utter itself *through our voices* in a sort of benign yet demonic possession. I find myself reciting or at least reading aloud in the works of Layton, Thomas, Garneau, Seferis, Merrill, partly *taken over* by the gift of rich, passionate, elegant, tensile or marmoreal language which these poets exhibit and deploy. I cannot say the same for the great majority of my strict contemporaries.

The citation incorporated here is from Seferis' celebrated 'ΜΕ ΤΟΝ ΤΡΟΠΟ ΤΟΥ Γ.Σ.' in which the first line, repeated toward the end of the poem — Wherever I may travel, Greece wounds me — has become part of the 'cultural literacy' of contemporary Greece. Phonetically, 'Meh Ton Tropo Tou G.S.,' i.e., gamma epsilon-lon, George Seferis' initials, would translate as 'In the Manner [Style] of G.S.'

- ²⁰ See Tzvetan Todorov, *Literature And Its Theorists* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984), for an illuminating study of Russian Formalism and its distinction between heterotelic or practical language and autotelic or poetic language. Todorov goes on to consider the relation between Döblin and Brecht, a discussion to which I am indebted for some of my citations. The now 'classic' analysis of the subject is, of course, Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972).

KAWAI-SAN

Terry Watada

He was always a quiet man.
His stern Meiji face hid emotion,
yet he felt passion, I'm sure.

As a lumberjack,
he once told my father
he wanted a woman — not a hooker
but a wife.
He wanted the boss's daughter.

My father
decided to be go-between
for love and beauty,
and in the end,
she chose him over all others
because he was a quiet man.

My father was Best Man
at the wedding in Minto,
a ghost town turned prison
at the start of the war.
The wind and trees swayed
with laughter for a time
deep into
the forest night.

For a quiet man,
he sure raised a lot of hell.