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The Literary Agenda

Reading and the Reader

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36. *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, first published 1928, 1930 as written by Florence Emily Hardy, ed. Michel Millgate (London: Macmillan, 1984), 151.
37. W. George Scarlett and Dennie Wolf, 'When It's Only Make-Believe: The Construction of a Boundary between Fantasy and Reality in Story-telling' (1979), in J. A. Appleyard, *Becoming A Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 51-3; hereafter cited as Appleyard.
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An Awakened Sense of Being

Introduction

Why might people need the holding-ground that literature offers? This chapter examines the extra potential dimensions, the exploratory in-between areas, and (in short) the quickened and deepened inner life for readers within the ethos of that holding-ground.

The sense of primary realities

William James said that the challenge that Tolstoy provided lay in his being 'one of those primitive oaks of men', a man with 'the aboriginal human marrow' in his bones, who could not be satisfied with the second-order insincerities and falsehoods of so-called polite civilization.¹

Tolstoy created in his character Levin a version of this original type, albeit a man less intimidating than his creator. For Levin is one who is awake to the reality of *first* things, like the vulnerable sneeze of his new-born baby, and of *last* things, the voice of the dying brother who, pronounced dead, still whispers, 'Not yet'. But in between the two, in the middle of things, he is also a person who feels all at sea—like a man, says Tolstoy, who having admired beforehand, on-shore, the secure and easy motion of a boat on the water, had actually got into that boat and found it quite different. That is indeed the territory of the nineteenth-century realist novel in which, for example, Levin himself cannot understand someone like his old friend Sviyazhsky, a man who thinks like a radical liberal but operates in his work and in his family like a dull conservative. 'What is the connection between that man's life and his thoughts?' Levin asks himself, like an innocent. For Levin is Tolstoy's doggedly idealistic Everyman, who down to the very roots of the personal is

representative of a sense of the absolute and the primal however obscured, entangled, or misplaced in the confusions of the human world. In his mind Levin asks both of Sviyazhsky and of himself, those obstinate questionings that, on a very different occasion, the young Wordsworth in 'Resolution and Independence' kept asking of a common peasant-figure, who seemed to have some fundamental good in him which the poet himself had not: 'How is it that you live, and what is it you do?'

Tolstoy's novella *Death of Ivan Ilyich* precisely enacts the radical shift from an existence formed by a secondary set of social expectations and conventions to the naked plight of the solitary individual who, faced with his own mortality, is forced to ask himself fundamental questions. 'What is it you want?' asks some inner voice Ivan Ilyich has never heard before his illness 'To live? Live how?' As Ivan tries to say to himself in defence and denial, he has been after all a successful professional lawyer, has lived to a prosperous middle age, has married well enough and raised a suitable family, much like Levin's Sviyazhsky. By such mental screens, says Tolstoy, the sick man tries in vain to keep away the thought of death, and with it the thought of a life wasted; but 'the same thought—it wasn't just a thought but something that seemed like reality—kept coming back and facing him'.

For those who feel institutionalized or conventionalized, existence is like living in the dark shelter of Plato's cave shut out from the original light of reality. This chapter is about a primary feeling of ontological reality awakened in literature and through literature, in place of the sense of a second-rate, low-affect world of the merely routine or automatic. That is to say: the coming to life of things—places, people, ideas, feelings, objects, issues—as substantively felt and compelling realities tested out in the reading present. There, realities exceed the extent to which they are named or known. Ontology *before* epistemology is the law of life here. 'It wasn't just a thought but something that seemed like reality.'

In what follows, in the making of this claim for an awakened ontology,² my opening section, 'How First Things Last', is essentially about the uses of trouble or crisis in disclosing the sense of a primary reality; whereas section two, 'The Middle of Things', is more concerned with the sudden presence of surprise and change and shift.

But in the chapter as a whole it is the complex interrelation of first and last and midst that marks out the contemplative work to be done within literature's holding-ground. This chapter attempts to rescue reading from institutionalization by maintaining the instincts of emotional recognition within what is nonetheless the discipline of attentive deciphering.

1. How first things last

The cry

A fine poem by Les Murray entitled 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow' tells the story of a man found inexplicably crying aloud in the midst of a busy main-street in Sydney. The word goes round: 'There's a fellow weeping down there. No one can stop him.' A crowd of amazed onlookers gathers around him:

The man we surround, the man no one approaches
simply weeps, and does not cover it, weeps
not like a child, not like the wind, but like a man
and does not declaim it, nor beat his breast, nor even
sob very loudly—yet the dignity of his weeping
holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes about him
in the midday light, in his pentagram of sorrow...

That between-stanza space ('the dignity of his weeping | holds us back') has to do with all I have tried to say in Chapter 1 about creating attentive places for the resonance of what matters. Within such a place this man of Murray's could be a prophet, in a lamentation like Jeremiah's:

Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me...

—could even be in imitation of Christ, when the shortest verse in the whole Bible says, simply and barely, 'Jesus wept'—'an *argument*', said John Donne in a sermon preached in Whitehall, Lent 1622, 'of his being man'. Or equally of course this is a place that also admits the thought that he could just be a person in the midst of nervous breakdown, a lunatic even. But perhaps most of all, that unnamed man in the street is also the poet, standing for what being a poet has

to mean in his emotional representativeness, with the on-looking crowd as his readers.

Les Murray knows well enough how poetry, like crying, can be dismissed as a soft or childish or gendered thing, as though best left to the women to feel for rather than the conventionally tough (non-reading) male. But this unmanned man here, outside those grotesque stereotypes and all the more human for it, has in his weeping a primal language of sheer physically feeling presence, an 'argument' for being that is existent before any words and upsets all kinds:

and many weep for sheer acceptance, and more
refuse to weep for fear of all acceptance,
but the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing,
the man who weeps ignores us, and cries out
of his writhen face and ordinary body
not words but grief, not messages but sorrow
hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea—

In memory of this primal elemental language, Murray's words of poetry are made into a discrete and protected place for their version of weeping out loud: the poem differs from the life it here describes only in being without the threat of utter public exposure, as well as without the severance of private concealment.

In that urban space in Sydney the people don't know what to do, how or if to help; but their attention remains held nonetheless. In a world of hidden and denied emotions only some of the bystanders feel able to receive from the man what the poem calls 'the gift of weeping'. Others in the crowd, still looking on at the silent man who seeks no help, find their minds 'longing for tears as children for a rainbow', sun within rain, the good inside the painful.

'There is a crust about the impressive parts of men's minds,' wrote John Ruskin in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 'which must be pierced through before they can be touched to the quick; and though we may prick at it in a thousand separate places, we might as well have let it alone if we do not come through somewhere with a deep thrust' ('The Lamp of Power').

Poetry is the great articulate cry. 'Dispute it like a man,' urges Shakespeare's Malcolm: 'But I must also feel it as a man,' replies Macduff. Sometimes in the strain of his life it was as though Ruskin

himself might have stood bare-headed in the city streets, in all the reactive danger of the evangelical spirit in which he was raised, crying like Lear:

Howl, howl, howl! O you are men of stones,
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vaults should crack.

(*King Lear* 5.3.231-3)

At the very least for Ruskin, if the heavens will not crack, the human carapace should. Literature, he believed, must reverse human hardening, reminding the people of their first hearts, lost in secondary concealments and protections.

But when, more quietly and requiring nothing, Murray's man weeps in public, there are also two things he does *not* do which he might have. He does not cry like a child, though the crowd in response long for tears as a child for a rainbow. Nor does he call to a God, but when he stops weeping hurries away 'evading believers'. Yet these two different primary things that he does *not* do border close upon what he does. Implicitly they help define poetry by the primal human impulses of crying and calling which it both draws upon and transfigures. Some poems, like this one in my experience, seem to hold founding thoughts and deep cultural memories like genes, so to speak, within the very biology of their individual makeup. I want to register such resonances not in abstraction but through Donne's version of what 'argument' is: specific embodied instances of fundamental impulses which this poem seems to recall.

The child in us

First, the presence of the (lost) child.

George Eliot's young Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) often finds her emotions *bursting* out of her like tears themselves, as if she were not yet strong enough to contain them within herself, and the strength of her lay rather in the emotional forces themselves; as though she intuitively believed, moreover, that her emotions belonged not just within her own self but out in the world that seemed to cause them. For the child the pain and the despair are absolute:

Very trivial, perhaps, this anguish seems to weather-worm mortals who have to think of Christmas bills, dead loves and broken friendships, but it was not less bitter to Maggie—perhaps it was even more bitter—than what we are fond of calling the real troubles of mature life. 'Ah, my child, you will have real troubles to fret about by and by,' is the consolation we have almost all of us had administered to us in our childhood, and have repeated to other children since we have been grown up. (volume 1, chapter 7)

You lose sight of your mother in some strange new place; school-fellows shut you out of their game; a brother or sister or best friend scorns you. Though adults may tell you that you will get over such things, these momentary experiences of snub or parting can seem like total and unique losses, with no equipment in us yet to make them customary or passing. Such absolute moments, says George Eliot, leave their trace and live in us still, 'but such traces have blended themselves irrecoverably with the firmer texture of our youth and manhood; and so it comes that we can look on at the troubles of our children with a smiling unbelief in the reality of their pain.' That is the adult way: that absolutes turn out to become relative in the blend. 'This too shall pass' says the ancient Sufi proverb. Whatever it is, the crowd in the Sydney street will have tried of course to get over it—the same survival mechanism of living on in time, however half-knowingly damaged. Which also means getting over that childhood state to which trouble sometimes seems to reduce us. 'Move on' and 'Get closure' are the great buzz phrases of the self-help manuals. But the idea of getting over it, even in the very midst of the experience, is itself part of the equivocal pain of semi-denial, to make the thing mean and matter less.

But my point is not just about childhood grief; it is about childhood utterance and expression.

Charles Fernyhough is both an academic psychologist and a novelist who combined the two in a memoir of the development of his own daughter, from birth to aged 3. In *The Baby in the Mirror* (2008) one of his central interests is what he calls 'private speech' when little children speak their thoughts out loud, when they play, with their thoughts audibly spilling out into the world in a busy unselfconsciousness that comes from there being no finished self yet in place.

His 17-month daughter, for example, is trying to fit brightly coloured animal pieces—dog, duck, teddy bear, bee—into the corresponding

shapes in a wooden board, her mother in attendance as a helping adjunct to her efforts. As she turns over a piece from the pile, the child names it and, encouraged by the mother, says what sound it makes. But there is a moment when she can't get the fish to fit in. 'In' she says as if entreating it; then in her effort, 'Hard.' Fernyhough believes this last is a genuine borderline-moment: partly a request for external help, he says ('Can't you see how hard this is?'), but also at the same time an internal note for herself. Her mother helps her but she also struggles with the next piece: 'Um, bit hard' she says as she tries changing her posture to get the piece in. 'It's very hard, that one,' her mother agrees. This is, says Fernyhough, not just parental sympathy but an aspect of shared thinking, thinking that is actually happening out there in the world *between* people in the shaping and maturing of intelligence. Soon the parent will only hear the child talk her thoughts aloud, including her own versions of the parental voice ('Come on, you'll be alright'), when the parent is still in earshot but no longer immediately by. What is caught in action here is the process of developing internalization.

Thus the larger point I want to emphasize, still in relation to Les Murray's poem, concerns the gradual human movement from outside in: the transitional movement from a blurred so-called 'private' speech, where thought is still spoken out loud, to 'inner' speech, in which thought becomes silent and separated within an internal identity. When that movement is complete, when the boundaries between within and without are beginning to get established, there is, as so often, at once gain and loss. For a little time, the parents will still hear their child directly thinking aloud, spilling the thoughts into the world. Thereafter, though the created inner life and identity are emphatically an achievement not to be denied or regretted, sharing becomes quite different.

What the parents first heard was (as A. S. Byatt so beautifully describes it in her novel *Still Life*) a new voice pronouncing the old words, where before there had been no voice but only a wail or snuffle. Never such innocence again, as another poet says. For later, as the child's thoughts become inner and separate, it is the lost shared outerness that the parents must register, even whilst half-trying to resist their nostalgia. At an equivalent moment of

development, C. Day-Lewis writes this to his son, and perhaps even more to his own now lonely memory, in 'Walking Away':

I can see
You walking away from me towards the school
With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free
Into a wilderness, the gait of one
Who finds no path where the path should be.

'I have had worse partings,' says the poet. But 'that hesitant figure', he writes, 'Has something I never quite grasp to convey | About nature's give-and-take':

How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.

Poetry is often about such informal changes, helpless ruptures, and inevitable, acceptable losses—formless until poetry gives them the form that life-in-passing seems hardly to acknowledge.

What is more, such poetry re-creates in its own way something of the lost realm of private outer thought lodged in between the social and the internal. It is not, of course, exactly the child's uncensored and spilt formative thinking, a magical openness onto the world. But it is an inner voice also simultaneously outside itself, on paper. Silently reading, you hear its voice inside your own head as if aloud yet transplanted. However, its utterance must also now bear the demands of adulthood. These include what Wordsworth in his 'Immortality Ode' called 'thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears'; and Day-Lewis's father-figure is, still tearfully, on the verge of that understanding. For this is writing that begins from the depths of silence, when direct speaking fails and crying must stop.

The plea and the prayer—the Psalmist

This brings me to the second great primal element suggested by 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow': the direct cry for (missing) help.

In a strange and flawed little book called *Beyond* which he wrote towards the end of his life, aged 81, I. A. Richards argued for the closeness of the cry of prayer to the sources of poetry. Richards was one of the great founding figures of literary criticism in the 1920s, when the new discipline of closely attentive reading seemed at the

very forefront of academic thought, and literature a central subject in a way that perhaps has never quite been maintained or recovered in the universities since. In *Beyond* it is the psalms to which Richards turns for their having become, ever since their translation into the vernacular, the collective cultural model for the lonely cry of Everyman. But what within them Richards concentrates upon is what technically in rhetoric is known as 'apostrophe'—the sudden turning away from the ordinary course of a speech to address some person or object, present or (more usually) absent. Here, for example, is Psalm 42 (3-7):

My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say
unto me, Where is thy God?
When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me...
Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted in
me?

Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his
counenance.

O my God, my soul is cast down within me

There is a kind of reader who argues that human beings have cried to God because they have not been able to help themselves. Consequently they have had to invent someone or something to cry to, in lieu of action, instead of finding nothing. 'Where is now my God?' But the sort of reader I try for in my own teaching is one who also wants to know what the meaning might be like from the *inside* of somebody else's belief or situation. For such a reader, regardless of professed belief or unbelief, it is the subtle little intricately changing propositions in Psalm 42 that seem implicit signs of some larger framework of understanding than that of the modern self.

For these subtle propositions deny that this is (as the reductionist might say) no more than a man merely talking 'to himself'. First, the text of the Psalmist says: My tears—the tears that are in me or burst out of me—call 'unto me'. That is to say, the emotions bear messages both from me and then back to me at another level. And as I, the Psalmist, listen to their cry, they make me 'pour out my soul in me'—as though my *soul* (or heart, in the translation in the Book of Common Prayer) were a deeper version of my *tears* now released in response to them. But in the next move it is I who then cry back to

my own soul, asking: Why art thou disquieted *in* me? And finally if my soul, not answering, will not turn itself to hope in God, I have to do so in its stead. I have cried *to* my soul as it has cried *in* me, but now I cry *for* my soul *to* my God: 'O my God, my soul is cast down within me.' I know these are tiny intricacies of reading, but 'See God in small,' said Lancelot Andrewes, one of the great team of translators that made the King James Bible, 'or you will never see Him in large.' It is not just true of a God.

'Deep calleth unto deep' the Psalmist says (42:7), as he stands by the river of Jordan and its waterfalls. But it is not just that the deep-in-him calls out to the deep outside or beyond, as if in lost correspondence. A sense of the deep-from-without is also what sets the deep-in-him crying for it in the first place. The cries are not just of the soul, they are (as it were) the cries of God not being there, seeking to preserve the relationship even by calling. The Psalmist makes one further final venture in lament, resolving to turn direct to God in his own voice:

I will say unto God my rock, Why hast thou forgotten me? why go I in mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?

Again a sceptical reader may well object in the name of conventional logic: what is the use of crying to Him at the fact that He does not hear your cries, when this cry is just another of them? But that is what the word 'thou' is for: 'Why hast thou forgotten me? Why hast thou forsaken me?' It won't give up by using the word 'he' instead. It still makes of language an act of calling, in the hope of being heard and of being spoken to.

What deeply interested the aged I. A. Richards was not just the ancient cry to God, made even in moving defiance of its own apparent unavailability. It was that the call to God was emblematic of *all* discourse which, in the face of loss or absence or need, has finally to attempt the impossible or the contradictory utterance. Otherwise the heart or soul would be utterly silenced in despair. What Richards thought to be one of the great first acts in creative human utterance was the address to a missing Thou of any kind, in any form. 'I can see | You walking away from me.' This—the call unanswered but still calling—seems close to the origin of poetry and its implicit continuing purpose in existence.

Reading the religious . . . ?

In *Mr Sammler's Planet*, Saul Bellow's Sammler, a Holocaust survivor who does not think of himself as a religious man, does not know why he keeps reading and returning to medieval religious texts. It is not that he wants to hitch a ride on the language of a belief he does not actually hold. Nor is his a curatorial concern that if modern people cannot read religious writing any more then much of human literature is lost to them, and will be lost ever increasingly in future. What moves him is rather what made William James write *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: that there is something in this, even if we do not formally believe in it, even though we do not know how to translate it; something of deep primal importance even if finally we have to leave it behind.

It is towards the strange deep old texts that Sammler is drawn. Long tendentious arguments and reductive explanations are what, Sammler says, he finds too much around and about him. The old man is tired of their coercive pigeonholing, their constant thinness, and their passing fashion. He wants instead descriptions of experience to carry in his head, without being told what to make of them. Weary of modern noise, he wants succinct and austere sayings that stay in mind like poetry. 'This too shall pass.' What draws Sammler to these religious works, even as a non-believer, is a dissatisfaction related to Saul Bellow's own sense that modern people may be trapped in a false and over-familiar framework, by an impoverished world-view. As if they might need a different model of self and a deeper psychological vocabulary to accompany an alternative ontology. 'I am,' cried the poet Cowper, 'a stranger to the system I inhabit.'

What Saul Bellow feared was that the cry would not be made any more if it seemed melodramatic, stupid or pointless, and meaninglessly out-of-date.

The example of Johnson's sinner

It is not difficult to understand how very hard it may be from within the middle of things to extricate a lost voice in a lost cause. Here is an example even from an age still imbued with the possibility of prayer, confession, and repentance. It is the story of one who would not cry in the street, and could hardly pray to God, but felt he had

betrayed all that he had previously meant to be. His name was William Dodd.

Samuel Johnson once wrote the most final of all his sermons as a proxy for Dodd who was a disgraced clergyman sentenced to death for forgery. It was a sermon of ultimate repentance to be delivered by Dodd to his fellow-prisoners, in his last office as a cleric. But nearing the eve of execution Dodd felt too guilty, too fearful, and too disgraced to write it, as though he were doubly defeated—first by what he himself had done, and then again by what the shameful thought of it despairingly disabled him from now doing. We know a lot in our own time about the disgrace of public figures caught in scandal and hypocrisy, about repentances or atonements that would never have been thought of if the culprit had not been found out. But Johnson knew that repentance had to pray for its very possibility even against itself. He gave Dodd, like some fallen Adam, the language in which to say that almost impossible thing when the Cretan liar now claims he is finally speaking the truth.

The shortness of the time which is before us, gives little power, even to ourselves, of distinguishing the effects of terror from those of conviction; of deciding, whether our present sorrow for sin proceeds from abhorrence of guilt, or dread of punishment; whether the violence of our inordinate passions be totally subdued by fear of God, or only crushed and restrained by the temporary force of present calamity.

He writes *'even to ourselves'*—*'we'* here are the condemned, who ought perhaps to be the best judges of our own inner sincerity at the last, were we not certainly our most biasedly self-interested witnesses too. The fallen prose of the self-damaged and the self-disauthenticating had to spell all this out, as poetry might not, struggling at *'distinguishing'* and *'deciding'* one thing from another, in a tarnished analysis of a complex and dubious context. And in hiddenly writing it Johnson really did mean those words *'us'* and *'our'* and *'ourselves'*, for he feared in himself also such natural hypocrisy. *'I am almost afraid to renew my resolutions'*, he wrote in his private prayers and diaries at Easter 1765, thinking of how often in the past he had made his contrite vows and then broken them. *'Almost afraid'*, and yet he did renew them, just as he asked Dodd to pray for him too when he handed the sermon over.

In such confessions, offered here as another prime type of literature, humans don't know if they mean what they utter; they would be bound to think they did; and they cannot trust what they are bound to want to think, though equally they cannot trust their despair either. In that self-implicatedness everything must suffer in acting, act in suffering.³ For here lies the human interest—in the middle earth's refusal either wholly to deny its erring and its helplessness or completely to succumb to them; in that rich deep area created by the continuous interchange between passive and active which marks out the human situation.

And all the time amidst the infinite regressions of thought upon thought, it makes no difference: we, Dodd's audience, are going to die and somewhere, even if we ourselves never find it, there should be the real truth of ourselves and what we are and mean. The task of writing is to put it all forward, saturating the solution, in evidence both for and against till we hardly know the difference. That is writing at the confessed maximum of its self-known limitation, leaving itself as a personal thing now, an existence, just short of the final judgement. *'Let me not love thee, if I love thee not,'* wrote George Herbert in restless relation to his troublesome God.

Yet, though thou troublest me, I must be meek;

In weakness must be stout.

Well, I will change the service, and go seek,

Some other master out.

Ah my dear God! Though I am clean forgot,

Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.

(Herbert, 'Affliction I')

It is like Ben Jonson in his grief-ridden poem *'To Heaven'*, fearing lest it be thought *'these prayers be | For weariness of life, not love of thee.'* No one knows how wholly sincere he or she is; everyone knows the ulterior motivations one always has. Even the wish to be sincere may be insufficiently no more than second-order. But what these poets have is the clean sense of an ultimate reality before the imagined eyes of which they work to yield up everything only then to let it stand, in that middle realm of being. The achievement of the human cry is both active and suffering.

Prayer become poetry's cry

But even in a secular world without a prayer, that is where the most serious writing still stands: *in medias res*, in an appeal that, short of certain truth, or final judgement, or a missing God, nonetheless posits or imagines that degree of serious effort at witness. This is why I. A. Richards was interested in poems unconsummated by external answers or responses. The poem could be to a dead spouse or a distant loved one, to a memory of place or happening, in mitigation of loss or in celebration of recall.

In any such case Richards offers a shorthand gnomic formula for what goes on in such work. It was this: that what the lines are speaking *of*, says Richards, becomes immediately and literally that *to* which they are spoken, and that *for* which they speak. It is like (paradoxically) telling your dead father or lost husband or grown-up son that he is not there with you when you most need him. This is the double loss of those to whom you would now turn for help in such bereavement were they not also the ones who had died. You speak of them, you speak to them even of themselves, and you speak for them even to yourself—and all in that arguably irrational but primal intuition which is built into the very use of language: namely, that such speaking, as it goes forth into the air, is also the hope of being spoken *to*, in return.

So for example—my example—a four-line poem by George Crabbe written on the death of his wife, Sarah. The two had met and become engaged when he was 18. She then waited more than ten years for him to establish himself. They were married for thirty years when she died in 1813 after much illness, physical and mental, following the death of one of their sons in 1796. 'His Late Wife's Wedding-Ring':

The ring, so worn as you behold,
So thin, so pale, is yet of gold:
The passion, such it was to prove;
Worn with life's cares, love yet was love.

This is, first, a poem written *on* or *of* 'the ring', though the ring, now left behind, is of course naturally reminiscent of his dead wife, not least in that (doubly) 'worn' state of being 'thin' and 'pale'—as she herself must have been in the later years.

But second, it is also written *to* the ring, as the widower seems meditatively to turn it round and round in his fingers ('so worn...so thin, so pale'), the object coming to life 'yet' for being left there as a memory in place of 'her', the lost 'thou' who continually wore it. For poetry is that kind of ontological awakening (not just a knowing it and a describing it) when things become really the most of themselves through the attention of human consciousness and human recognition.

Thirdly, however, the poem is written finally *for* the sake of the ring and what it represents even without its owner. Amidst the bereft silence, and in all its right to a consciously disproportionate brevity, the poem is to speak on behalf of the marriage the ring betokened. The ring marks and keeps the promise that the originating 'passion' of youth should give way to nothing less than 'love' through the years. For like the marriage, the poem keeps its word: 'love yet was love'. But also, in counterpart to that affirmation, though the ring 'is yet of gold', the final tense must recognize death if not defeat: 'love yet was love'. It is like the mother's wedding ring in Tony Harrison's poem 'Timer' which survives her cremation. Such poetry exists in that inextricable middle earth which, I am arguing, is the literary domain, pitched between the dependent and the creative, the helplessness and the effort.

In similar spirit, there are those wonderful lines from Bishop Henry King's 'Exequy' to his own dead wife in the tomb—written to 'thee', when to put 'her' would be to lose her twice over:

Thou wilt not wake
Till I thy fate shall overtake:
Till age, or grief, or sickness must
Marry my body to that dust
It so much loves; and fill the room
My heart keeps empty in thy Tomb.
Stay for me there; I will not fail
To meet thee in that hollow Vale.
And think not much of my delay;
I am already on the way

Ageing and dying are of course helplessly passive; but here love makes them as though they were now also willing things in him,

loving and active, in the journey to joining and re-marrying her. It is beautiful that through the simple intimate tones of their shared earthly life—stay for me, wait for me, I will not fail—he not only imagines her but imagines her thinking of him. That is the great poetic loop: the beyond held within; the within pulled beyond.

‘Instead of flowers [he writes to her], accept these words:

Receive a strew of weeping verse
 From thy griev'd friend, whom thou might'st see
 Quite melted into tears for thee.
 Dear loss! Since thy untimely fate
 My task hath been to meditate
 On thee, on thee: thou art the book,
 The library whereon I look
 Though almost blind.’

He is that friend, that reader of her past life. And thinking of himself as ‘thy friend’ is far better than his simply writing ‘me’. In literature there is something important about writers taking back *in* what they have just given out, as they go along from phrase to phrase and line to line: ‘on thee, on thee’. That is to say, ‘thy griev'd friend’ offers a steady distance from ‘me’ but a distance across which almost immediately he receives back from ‘her’ the imagination of her seeing him. ‘Whom thou might'st see | Quite melted into tears: *might* (because that is what I am often like now) *if* you were still with me. And those tender places where the verse turns in that way into a half line—‘From thy griev'd friend’, ‘Though almost blind’, ‘It so much loves’, ‘Stay for me there’—are like a restrained representation of loving tears not to be exposed in public. It is part of what in the previous chapter I described as a secret second language-within-language, that such half-lines should regularly come at the beginning of a line that seems only to come afterwards, stopped short but left-over: ‘that dust/It so much loves’.

Dear (forgive
 The crime) I am content to live
 Divided

‘Divided, with but half a heart | Till we shall meet’, ‘Till we shall meet and never part’. For the reader of such internal secondary codes, it means that these are the persistent left-over feelings of

bereavement itself, the simple, tender, but not broken aftermath. So it is that the bereaved poet cries to the grave, to the earth:

I give thee what I could not keep.
 Be kind to her

The ‘give’ is like breathing out, letting go; but the ‘could not keep’ on the same line takes a deep breath back in, by having to admit the other side of the thought of release. The left-over half line that must follow is, again, like the breaking plea of a restrained tear. Without such subtly protective codes and patterns, sentiment would be left exposed or untested, as vulnerable or embarrassing or oppressive. Instead, it is as if in such places literature were something which is at once writing and reading itself, crying and hearing itself, like a live internally communicating reality.

Richards concludes: ‘This identification (of = to = for) holds with more poetry and high utterance than we customarily recognize. The speaker becomes a mouthpiece (of = to = for) what speaks, what is communing with itself.’⁴ The poet and the poetry *become* what they think of.

The cry in the novel: confession

But the story of the development of this deep aspect of literature has one further twist so great as perhaps to license my introducing it rather simply and obviously. Literature not only bespeaks what too often is not said, or can hardly be said, outside literature. In its evolution it further begins to include within itself the depiction of people *not* doing (even refusing to do) what literature does at the level of expression.

An example would involve turning a novelist imaginatively loose upon all those people in the Sydney street who tried to avoid crying. But here is a different instance, in resistant denial of first things.

A young man knows he is in danger of doing something very wrong. He goes to an older friend, an easy-going clergyman, intent on confessing his temptation in order to prevent it turning into act. But when he gets to his mentor's house, it is not like the old ritual of confession, formally enforcing commitment with the mouth to a hole in the wall and an expectant ear on the other side. The fact that the young man is seated so informally in the presence of an old

friend who has no inkling of the serious internal struggle he has come to confide, shakes his own belief in the reality of its seriousness. 'It was not, after all, a thing to make a fuss about.' But the novelist writes:

Was there a motive at work under this strange reluctance of Arthur's which had a sort of backstairs influence, not admitted to himself? Our mental business is carried on much in the same way as the business of the State: a great deal of hard work is done by agents who are not acknowledged. In a piece of machinery, too, I believe there is often a small unnoticeable wheel which has a great deal to do with the motion of the large obvious ones. Possibly, there was some such unrecognised agent secretly busy in Arthur's mind at this moment—possibly it was the fear lest he might hereafter find the fact of having made a confession to the Rector a serious annoyance, in case he should *not* be able quite to carry out his good resolutions. (*Adam Bede*, chapter 16)

Nobody in real life ever wants to be exposed as Arthur Donnithorne is here by the novel and the novelist around him. In adult life you can more or less carry on going wrong: often there may be no sign, no person, no formal procedure to indicate even that it is wrong. That is how most of us perhaps get by, uneasily let off the hook in an equivocal version of freedom.

Needing to speak out and yet not wanting to: this is of course one of those in-between grey areas created by the Victorian novel, in its depiction of the compromisedness of the ordinary. In the history of feeling it is that form at that time that most marks out the territory between the old world and the modern one, a transition that is not only historical, as if once-and-for-all, but recurrent in every crisis of modern values.

For of course by a sort of psychological backstairs work, the young man does succumb to the temptation of the sexual. The young squire Arthur Donnithorne seduces Hetty, the young woman on his estate also loved by his woodsman, Adam Bede. When, in chapter 27 entitled 'A Crisis', Adam catches the two of them in an embrace, Arthur for all his customary self-centredness suddenly experiences that head-spinning shock so characteristic of the novel's perspectivism—a shock which made him for the moment see himself in the light of Adam's indignation, and regard Adam's suffering as not merely a consequence, but an ele-

ment of his error. The words of hatred and contempt—the first he had ever heard in his life—seemed like scorching missiles that were making ineffaceable scars on him. All screening self-excuse, which rarely falls quite away while others respect us, forsook him for an instant, and he stood face to face with the first great irrevocable evil he had ever committed.

Suddenly, through this reversal of the normal point of view, there is revealed here a lost and neglected absolute regardless of mitigation or excuse; an ultimate reality disclosed not only to the victim but to the perpetrator, 'face to face' with the 'ineffaceable' and 'irrevocable'. This is the moment of truth revealed by the moment of crisis as it breaks through that 'screen', as George Eliot calls it, of persistent self-excuse which maintains Arthur's ego. It is like the final illness that breaks through the protagonist in Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich* to tell him that throughout his life he has not lived as he ought to have lived. And yet, unsurprisingly, Arthur resists this moment which, even because of its pain, could have been the greatest moral moment of his life. Instead, in the middle of the dilemma, he chooses—all too understandably for any reader—evasion and escape, secretly carrying the guilt in preference to openly facing the irrevocable. That is to say: Arthur Donnithorne becomes a second-order person surviving by hiding from 'the first' (a phrase twice used in the passage). He will not occupy the place where the reality most is, where he might actually have to do what the situation requires; he will not let the crisis come to a crisis and break him down into primary confession.

Instead, he feels it is too late and therefore tries, as we say, to get away with it, perhaps also convincing himself of a duty to Hetty's reputation not to let Adam know quite how far beyond kissing they have gone. For at the back of Arthur's mind just before this moment and returning just after it, is a secret thought, the 'small unnoticeable wheel': it is the sly desperation of the get-out clause, like a survival mechanism for the threatened little ego—

Arthur had felt a sudden relief while Adam was speaking; he perceived that Adam had no positive knowledge of the past, and there was no irrevocable damage done by this evening's unfortunate rencontre.

He doesn't know how bad it is. 'There was no irrevocable damage done' as against his previously standing 'face to face with the first

great irrevocable evil he had ever committed': it all depends on whether we are talking about what Adam knew, or what actually happened, and how long denial can maintain that screen between the two. As the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips puts it in his book *On Balance*: getting away with it is an uncompleted action, at once in need and in fear of punishment. For punishment, like crisis, brings certain acts to their decisive ending: 'It confirms a cause-and-effect story; it narrows the consequences of actions. [But] if you get away with it, for however long, you are on the open road of unpredictable consequence.' These not-having-been-punished experiences, concludes Phillips, are 'miniature death-of-God experiences', experiments in secret, a desperate privacy radically defiant of objectivity, when 'you have changed the world without letting it know'.⁵

In place of confession, then, there is the novel with its discovery of what is now technically known as 'Free Indirect Discourse': the inner mental language of the character loosely released, without the character acknowledging it, into the language of the narrative. The realist novel does not put 'Arthur thought this or said that'; whatever he thinks, consciously or unconsciously, whatever he does not say, is simply exposed to sympathy or judgement, to the world of readers. Free Indirect Discourse restores our second-order evasions and complications to the verge of direct primary speech in an outer world.

George Eliot is the best analyst of what she herself also created, the capacity to move back and forth between those differing powers in herself, a mark of an extraordinary mental integration. When she creates the terrible marital row between Lydgate and Rosamond in *Middlemarch*, all that she hears unspoken in Lydgate, alone in the row's aftermath, is a model for her ideal reader's mix of imagination, mitigating sympathy, and utter judgement at almost the self-same time:

It was as if a fracture in delicate crystal had begun, and he was afraid of any movement that might make it fatal. His marriage would be a mere piece of bitter irony if they could not go on loving each other.... She had still a hold on his heart, and it was his intense desire that the hold should remain strong. In marriage, the certainty 'She will never love me much', is easier to bear than the fear, 'I shall love her no more.' (chapter 64)

Neither of those two direct inner voices, 'She will never love me much', 'I shall love her no more', is spoken out loud, is allowed to become the person; though in order to keep going Lydgate tacitly chooses the continuing disappointment of the first to suppress the utter finality of the second. But George Eliot could analyse both of these unspoken utterances as deeply and poignantly as one could any lines of poetry—as indeed she does earlier with Rosamond's response to Lydgate's plea for help: 'What can I do, Tertius?'—

That little speech of four words, like so many others in all languages, is capable by varied vocal inflexion of expressing all states of mind from helplessness to exhaustive argumentative perception, from the completest self-devoting fellowship to the most neutral aloofness. Rosamond's thin utterance threw into the words: 'What can I do!' as much neutrality as they could hold. They fell like a mortal chill on Lydgate's roused tenderness. (chapter 58)

That is a great reading as well as a great writing of what lies behind a few little words. It is as it was earlier—not even dramatically 'She will never love me' but 'She will never love me much'. That one last little word 'much', like the stressed I in 'What can I do?', makes all the difference. Imagining what the characters do not say within what they do, and what they dare not even consciously think, 'George Eliot' exists as such to give a sub-vocal presence to all that goes unvoiced in the world. It is as though unspoken words hang around the characters, like an unadmitted fate into which the reader enters instead, by proxy, to supply unacknowledged thoughts like a character's second and almost unconscious self. From the very inside of her own work George Eliot is the supreme version of that proxy-figure. She reads these people as though reading not poetry, but the residue of all ordinary real life.

With George Eliot, wrote the Victorian man of letters John Morley, the reader with a conscience opens the book as though putting himself in the confessional.⁶ Any reluctantly identifying reader possessed of a kindred memory or imagination, an equivalent secret and a conscience, is thus exposed silently as stand-in, in lieu of confession or prayer. All that we have established as upright citizens, all that makes us securely different from the characters gives way in the imaginative melting-pot of fiction. When a line of poetry strikes with

violence, when a character summons sudden terrifying identification, it is as if the thought and the feeling are happening as if for the first time again in human life.

'The people who come to evening classes,' says Saul Bellow's Herzog, contemplating his own class, 'are only ostensibly after culture. Their great need is for good sense, clarity, truth—even an atom of it. People are dying—it is no metaphor—for lack of something real to carry home when day is done.'⁷

2. In the middle of things

Ferguson's transitions

In thinking about first things in relation to the midst of things, I take guidance here from a somewhat neglected but historically foundational text, Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767). Adam Ferguson was a favourite author of Karl Marx in the development of his theory of alienation, as well as Walter Scott, in his vision of the history of Scotland. His *Essay* is a product of the Scottish Enlightenment yet at the same time challenges the primacy of the Enlightenment ideal of pure rationalism. Its main (we would now say, sociological) purpose was to examine societies in transition from their founding and securing purposes, through both ruptures and accommodations, to later changes and developments in the name of civilization.

In that emergent process it is the creation of separate disciplines and expert practices, says Ferguson, that is crucial to the stabilized improvement and progress of society. But the development of specialist excellence through such division of labour comes at a price. It is the price to be paid when the professionalized separation of each activity reaches the point at which society is composed of highly competent but closed-off parts of which none any longer contains or recalls the spirit needed to animate the whole.

To take an example close to home: it is right, says Ferguson, that libraries are liberally furnished with books, and a citizenry provided with a broad and thorough education. But, he argues, for all the good intentions of improvement there comes a tipping-point when we become passive students instead of creative thinkers

and 'substitute the knowledge of books, instead of the inquisitive or animated spirit in which they were written' (part 5, section 3). That is when a society becomes second-order and second-rate, exhausted just at the point when it seems most fair-minded, most reasonably easy-going, and most complete.

Then it is that an unruly minor prophet such as Ferguson is needed, for the purposes of revivification. Ferguson himself was a product of the Scottish Highlands at a time of transition when the rougher, wilder, hotter Highland values were being finally absorbed within the politer commercial mechanisms of the more dispassionately rational Lowlands. The Highlanders, he believed, had been an incorrigibly active and passionate people. They had thrown their passions into their objects—the parent in protection of the child's distress, the citizen in defence of friend or country, with a vehemence of feeling characteristically too strong and too immediate for narrower considerations of personal safety or interest. But as soon as such creatures come to rest in easy economic prosperity, he argued, they decay; courage degenerates into social emulation, while privacy and politeness become smooth civilized alternatives to shared honesty.

Of course, there is an obvious objection to be raised. We are bound to question how far any such sense of something primary that is lost is no more than a backward projection or a nostalgic illusion, at best perhaps a needful rather than an indulgent imagination. But whatever the rights and wrongs of Ferguson's view of human nature—or more aptly, its historical and cultural specifics—what is methodologically instructive is that, even thinking as he did, Ferguson did not seek to go *back* to Highland nature, did not believe he could return to some lost original home furnished with the natural first things of his tribal imagination. What we call 'Nature' was what was happening anywhere at any time, he said, including all the developing arts and inventions of humankind: it was where society was going to, not where it was coming from, that was his concern. Vitality for Ferguson—and this is the great challenge in this chapter—first things are only intuited, realized, tested, superseded, or transformed in the middle of things.

What is more, Ferguson insists that the underlying principles of our energy often flourish in bafflement of human intent, uncoordinated

with human recognition. We aim for some end, some peace, some rest, says Ferguson, only to find something else still to be done thereafter; when we obtain the security we think we wanted, we soon take it for granted in seeking something more than that for the sake of life; we are energized by the adversity we do not want. He also believed that the terrible realization of corruption or inertia at the crisis-point of a society's development is often the moment at which, in the realization itself, reform is already actually beginning. In what follows, I relish that excited and not merely sceptical thought of Ferguson's: that, in the mix of the first and the midst, we do not and cannot know wholly where we are or what we are doing.

'A middle state'

In his autobiography *A Sort Of Life*, the novelist Graham Greene talked of his experiencing the memory of his life-story as though through a long broken night. He could not tell the story consecutively, as if he were wide awake and lucid from first to last, but he did feel its presence intermittently surfacing in parts and pieces. 'As I write, it is as though I am waking from sleep continually to grasp at an image which I hope may drag in its wake a whole intact dream, but the fragments remain fragments, the complete story always escapes.'⁸ Greene did not feel securely on top of things, but still immersed in their midst. He could take no steady overview of himself but felt instead like some creature working its way intuitively along or within a line of time, with an occasional, temporary sense of loop or return or higher insight en route.

There is a cult novel by E. A. Abbott called *Flatland*, published in 1884 with the sub-title *A Romance in Many Dimensions*, which being made out of a basic geometric template offers a useful model for Greene's sort of experience. In it Abbott imagines a creature living in a two-dimensional plane, the land of the novel's title, who is challenged to ascend to a three-dimensional world, like our own, called Spaceland. The flat creature gets there only by first going down to the lower realm of Lineland and then lower still, to Pointland—both of them closed worlds that can no more imagine a higher dimension, he realizes, than he himself could within the confines of Flatland. By such acts of (as it were) reverse imagination, imagining less

than he knows now, Abbott's man on his return to Flatland is equivalently impelled, by analogy, to try to 'see' more than his own two dimensions tell him. For this is a mind now blindly struggling to think outside its own framework or configuration whilst still embodied within it. It is easy for the creatures in each successive dimension to look down on the level below them and recognize the limitations there: what is harder is to imagine that their own dimension is, likewise and analogously, not the ultimate one. This difficult imagination is what Abbott's protagonist calls Thoughtland. There he tries to hold on to his intimation of an extra dimension by repeating the mantra 'Upwards, and yet not Northwards'—since in his world's terms, northwards would only take him further along existing horizontal lines, not into another dimension above them. He can see it only through the mind's eye, and it is words that he needs to keep a hold on the elusive possibility of that uncharted reality: 'Upwards, and yet not Northwards... I determined steadfastly to retain these words as the clue.' Yet all the time, despite this blind language, he feels his vision of this extra place 'in some strange way slipping away from me, like the image of a half-grasped, tantalizing dream'.⁹

Reading can be like a further prompt or clue in the middle of our long broken night. Its fragments bring out in its readers pieces of their own forgotten experience, or flashes of experiences that had no words or place for themselves, intuitions and half-recognitions that may still remain shadowy, inexplicit, or under-appreciated. It is the openings that matter—the images that almost promise to bring in their wake the whole sub-conscious or unconscious dream.

'I read because I seem to have forgotten so much in life,' a colleague once told me, 'and, even before that, have perhaps under-appreciated or failed to register even more.' Books became a second, added memory. Reading some lines of verse, he thinks as in a burst of involuntary recognition: 'I had forgotten or dismissed something like this; didn't know I needed or had neglected that.' Or even, more blankly: 'I don't know what this is that is somehow affecting me with its not-quite-understood thought, or its strangely reminiscent atmosphere, or its new point-of-view; but it feels like some message that concerns me—without my yet knowing why.'

That mix of half-bafflement and half-enlightenment is what it is like for vulnerably equivocal creatures who arc, in the words of Pope at the beginning of the second epistle of his *Essay on Man*, 'placed on this isthmus of a middle state': 'With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side | With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride.' Humans have 'too much' in them for the secondary defences and strategies to be wholly containing or entirely proper; but they also have 'too little' knowledge and 'too little' security for total immunity in the first place.

Awakened and awakening surprise

In that sort of in-between world, neither fully one thing nor another, the simplest course seems to be to try to go on with things—the And then, And then, And then of one thing happening successively after another. 'And we have been on many thousand lines', writes Matthew Arnold in 'The Buried Life', adding, 'But hardly have we, for one little hour, | Been on our own line, have we been ourselves.' We go on and on, says Arnold—

But often, in the world's most crowded streets
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life.

For still, at times, suddenly, and even from within the midst of life, these temporary creatures seek to know 'whence our lives come and where they go'. We want to find the beginning, the purpose, and the destination of the story. It is, of course, a story that may be no more than the fantasy of a lost straight-forwardness, but it still marks a need. And in that need, along that line of time, just sometimes there is a lyric trigger which calls into existence something one did not even know to have been buried:

A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast
And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again.

Arnold puts elegiacally, and perhaps too elegiacally as is his way, what is also electrically exciting—the returned sense of an intermittent or under-used inner life; in the midst of things, a renewed belief in the existence of one's store or reservoir of experience.

There is a single line in Wordsworth that perfectly conveys that deep, almost innocent sense of (what I will call) poetic surprise, which is so often characteristic of the human position within the middle state, whether it occurs inside or outside poetry itself. The experience comes out of a simple evening walk, on Wordsworth's return to the Lake District after an unhappy time in London—a walk made in cold damp circumstances without apparent promise or welcome:

The sun was set, or setting, when I left
Our cottage door, and evening soon brought on
A sober hour, not winning or serene,
For cold and raw the air was, and untuned;
But as a face we love is sweetest then
When sorrow damps it, or, whatever look
It chance to wear, is sweetest if the heart
Have fulness in itself; even so with me
It fared that evening.

This is not verse that needs to *try* to be 'happy': it is what the happiness comes *out of*, the earlier *unhappiness*, that is the measure of the value of its happening. For now the poet finds in himself an increasingly gathering calm:

While on I walked, a comfort seemed to touch
A heart that had not been disconsolate:
Strength came where weakness was not known to be,
At least not felt... (*The Prelude* (1805), 4.142–56)

The great subtle line is, I think, 'Strength came where weakness was not known to be'. The heart had *not* been disconsolate: it is not simply a problem followed by a solution. Deeper and more gently, it is a subtly double experience: he did not know he had previously lacked what now he was glad to be given.

That is the beautiful quality of the coming of surprise, occurring by definition *before* we know it or can know what to make of it. That is when we don't merely use our sense of experience, as though reassuringly in advance, but rather find it. By this I do not mean just any old arbitrarily playful surprise, but surprise into a different state of being. This is why in this section I concentrate on the seriousness of surprise and its variants—intense interest of unexpected attention,

sensitive alertness to unannounced change, bursts of excitement and semi-recognition, utter wonder—as exemplary of experience, registered suddenly, agnostically, and in passing, in the midst of life. What matters as the reading goes along is the registering of change, however minute, even as it happens, and the nascent emotional charge that accompanies that micro-change even when it is hardly nameable.

Surprise is therefore, at this level of seriousness, not the vulgar notion of a one-off novelty but a triggered entry into a different immersive condition. Here, for example, from Thomas Hardy's poem 'Under the Waterfall', is a woman who speaks more gently than Hardy himself often does, as if not to disturb the domestic atmosphere and what goes on within it:

Whenever I plunge my arm, like this
In a basin of water, I never miss
The sweet sharp sense of a fugitive day
Fetched back....

It is like a waking dream of the kind that Graham Greene describes, from the midst of a life. As the hand goes under the water in the simplest of domestic rituals, the mind by a kind of synaesthesia goes beneath some equivalent surface-present of its own, feeling around within itself almost blindly. This is (almost paradoxically) a *regular* surprise given by her buried life—it cannot stay but it will not go away. For 'whenever' she physically plunges her arm in a basin of water, she repeatedly recalls a glass that her lover and she had alternately drunk from, at a picnic long ago, which she had then tried to wash in the waterfall:

Where it slipped, and sank, and was past recall,
Though we stooped and plumbed the little abyss
With long bared arms. There the glass still is.

The five last monosyllabic words and their quiet placing in the line are beautiful in every sense of stillness: 'There the glass still is.' The woman can't know that for sure, of course. It is an act of imagination and faith that the glass is still there intact, like some pristine memory preserved elsewhere in the world, which nothing of the lovers' subsequent story can ever touch or tarnish. The glass hidden

under the waterfall is like the memory now held in the poem. And the immersed hand is like trying to read the experience.

'And, as said, if I thrust my hand below | Cold water in basin or bowl, a throe | From the past awakens that time.' The throe is the spasm, the birth-pang, of thought—the pre-cerebral excitement too often excluded from professionalized accounts of thinking conceived as something inherently dispassionate. But in his *Principles of Psychology* (1855) the evolutionary philosopher Herbert Spencer likened having a thought to receiving a blow—something necessary to be heeded for one's survival. Something hits you, we say still; something strikes you, originally with violence, perhaps in later forms with what Wordsworth called a gentle shock of mild surprise.

There was a boy, wrote Wordsworth, who would playfully mimic the hootings of the owls, that they might answer him; but

when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill,
Then sometimes in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind....

(*The Prelude* (1805), 5.404–10)

It is the unexpected pause and silence in the midst of the game that first make the boyish mind change track. When the young De Quincey came upon these lines, in the company of Wordsworth himself, what he heard most devastatingly within those pauses came from that apparently little word 'far'. This complex scenery, he wrote in *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*, has done—'What? Has carried far into his heart the voice | Of mountain torrents'. It always struck him, he says, 'as with a flash of sublime revelation'.¹⁰

In *Creative Evolution* Henri Bergson wrote that sometimes, in the competition for space, life succeeds through having to make itself very small. So here a small passing word opens up everything, as though space itself entered to create the inner world of that boy, re-echoing to the world outside. At that moment De Quincey, feeling like the boy, felt also like a poet.

The example of Douglas Oliver

I first came upon the poet Douglas Oliver at a poetry reading he gave in Cambridge in 1974 when I was a rather stropplily unhappy and lonely student, taking a (sort of) evening off from the struggle to read Milton. Oliver was reading a long poem he had just published, *In The Cave of Succession*. It was an account of man called Q, the enquirer, who in a time of trouble takes himself, some rations, and a typewriter into a dark abandoned lead mine in the Derbyshire Peak District, known as Suicide Cave or sometimes Horseshoe Cave. I think Oliver did say at the time that he had himself done this over many nights for a period of several months, following the death of his son Tom who, born with Down's syndrome, had died before his second birthday. But I do know that I rarely went to poetry readings—disliking (doubtless over-reactively) the often arty atmosphere in which most poets read their poetry, casually off-hand and down-beat, it seemed to me, as if they had already done their job in writing it.

Douglas Oliver wasn't like that. When he read aloud, it was poetry in performance—not performance in the dramatically self-advertising sense, but something as concentrated, intense, and risky present as writing itself repeated in the act of working itself out, the poet going quietly to the very edge of risk in all the different pitches, pauses, tempi, and voices he gave himself to. He seemed to know that if it did not come alive at that moment, the poem was not there but dead. There is, he said, a vital difference between merely describing an experience and being it or performing it—which is like the distinction between trying to fix the Truth dogmatically into a single description and 'half-sensing a perfect truthfulness as a possibility hidden within our actions (performances)'. The latter sense of truth which is that of the literary way is, he concluded, 'a non-existent entity which nevertheless seems to guide us'.¹¹

In Oliver's *Cave* the troubled man named Q spoke and wrote in the dark, waiting for something called A to answer him back, like an oracle. But A calmly told Q that he was to write the story of a man who has acted so badly that he cannot have an oracle. Instead he must live with his failures constantly reminding him of what he cannot do, until he can write something good (in every sense) that is worthy of A. To do so, Q said he understood that he must rid

himself of himself; adding, that he must give up his ambitions for writing some well-polished literary text, but instead retain all the embarrassments and stutters of what he was experiencing there.

I did not understand it properly (probably still do not), and usually I did not appreciate poems like that, so much was I myself wanting answers. Indeed I hated it when people said glibly and preciously that poetry was not something to be understood. But the slow reality and careful authority of the reading from out of the cave made me patient for what seemed even in its quirkiness on the verge of the important. And in retrospect I learnt two things—though in a world that contains such bad models of education, I don't know if 'learnt' is or is not the right word for what comes from such embodied experience.

One was to do with reading aloud—with the way that in one sense it was hardly out loud but rather an external model and an objectified discipline for what could and should go on within, when reading and hearing were most attentively real to a mind taking in the words. Years later, in the late 1990s in Newcastle under Lyme I heard Douglas Oliver read again—in particular a poem entitled 'Well of Sorrows in Purple Tinctures'. In it the poet, now resident in Paris, is walking the night streets, thinking of his English dead ones, of his family—mother, sister, father, and that baby son, Tom. In his mind Oliver also carried the refrain of an old gospel tune, 'life's a burden you can lay down'. The audience kept hearing these two repetitive rhythms in the acoustic world he again created—walking the Paris boulevard, continually walking, with the accents of the deep south in 'lay my burden down, lay my-ah burden down'. Then suddenly this developed from lay my burden down—this quiet and gentle shock:

See my baby lay his head on a down pillow,
Pigeons flurrying on the boulevards.
Lay my bird in down.

My burden... my bird in. It was no trick. He didn't recite his poem; he *made* it again, made it come through itself again, immersed in front of us. Only later, says Oliver, does the performed poem become a 'text' once more, waiting to be re-activated by a reader, silent or aloud.

Thus, the second thing was the sheer *present-ness* of it all. Douglas Oliver was a reader who not only took his time but took the poem's time, like a verbal musician playing live from a text made into score. Latterly, inviting him to Liverpool, I heard him read Hardy or Dryden or Wyatt or Shakespeare or Milton, and it did not matter how long ago it was that the poems were written. He stayed in their time, inside their timing, undistanced from the historical text, as if literature were in that sense and for that moment what is often far too easily called 'timeless'. More accurately, the literature's own internal time, like a form of existence vocally re-created, was for the time the poem lasted, the only time to be registered in reality. It is not that we do not need historical knowledge, historical context to help understand what a text means: it is an important secondary aid. But I have no patience with my university colleague who claimed that no one could read *Paradise Lost* 'properly' without the footnotes in the great Longman's edition plus several books of literary criticism and theological background. Literature is not a branch of history (or politics, or sociology, or philosophy, or theology, or even literary criticism); no one can deny the corrective and informative uses of contextual instruction, but reading literature is time-travel in search of meaning, such that the works of all ages are available as, above all, primary and present.

Milton and Archimedes' lever

Hearing Douglas Oliver was like reading *Paradise Lost* at the moment when Milton's Satan lifts his wings to fly up through Chaos (an abyss that contains all the potential components of the universe), in search of a new world, Earth, which is rumoured to have been created at this time. Then all of a sudden:

plumb down he drops
Ten thousand fathom deep, and to this hour
Down had been falling, had not by ill chance
The strong rebuff of some tumultuous cloud
Instinct with fire and nitre hurried him
As many miles aloft (*Paradise Lost*, 2.933-8)

This is not a fancy sci-fi trip: there is something here about unimaginable origins, long prior to one's own life as a later inhabitant of

that once-new planet, still stirring one's memory as though from behind. 'And to this hour | Down had been falling': how huge suddenly is Milton's epic and its imagined universe, if all that space took all that time—and the event reaching forward such that Satan could still be falling even now as I read. It feels like some mind-spinning idea in poetic physics, making us take in thoughts we cannot really think. Poetry is often close to that paradox of imagining what is almost inconceivable, where imagination is not so much a simple transcendent triumph as a reflexive product of human limitation recognizing itself.

In the middle of things, without clear starting-points, there are no heroes who can raise the whole world on their own shoulders: we need leverage. Archimedes said that he was capable of building a machine with which he could move the entire earth—if only he could find a place on earth on which to stand it. Literature is a place, close to the impossible, for Archimedes' lever. Wordsworth said that he used the idea of Platonic reminiscence in the 'Immortality Ode'—the idea of an anterior origin or birthright which we dimly recalled in childhood but gradually lost and forgot thereafter—not as something he literally believed in but as an Archimedes lever, employed for the sake of a more shadowy intimation that he had from it. There are tools for the imagination which are less true than the truth that they may help to raise you towards, tools validated only in retrospect by what they riskily enabled. These are the phrases, situations, images that almost promise to bring in their wake the whole sub-conscious dream.

These strong emotions of surprise and excitement in the act of reading do not sit easily with what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur has called the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. Ricoeur believes that all texts require interpretation in order to find their true meaning; that all interpretation involves suspicion; and that suspicion is occasioned by the gap between the apparent meaning of a text and its real meaning, often to be uncovered in spite of the text's own (frequently sub-conscious) defences, self-interests, and illusions. But I do not know why thinking and questioning should necessarily take the form of suspicion. Nor do I see why or how sceptical thinking is the place from which we can or should begin. It is a second move, not a first one, and even in second readings I don't want wholly to leave

behind the first responses—as if we now know the poem so well that we can discount those initial feelings and really begin to criticize it. The sort of reader I try to encourage in my teaching is one who starts from curiosity, with potential sympathy, in trying to get into a text. The first task in the middle of things is to seek to imagine what is this thing one is reading, and even what it might feel like emotionally to believe what it says.

Here for example is perhaps one of the most ostensibly conservative passages in English literature—the justification of God in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*. A modern reader might easily dismiss it, out of suspicion, protest, or disbelief. But that is not what first happens when I actually read the lines. Here Milton, most dangerously, has God Himself speak of how Adam and Eve were created ‘sufficient to have stood though free to fall’: theirs was that middle state of active and passive, when to be created wholly passive would only make for an automatic obedience which would be no real obedience at all. They cannot justly accuse me, says Milton’s God, that the fault was in their making, and that their maker could, should and indeed must have foreseen it—

As if their predestination overruled
Their will, disposed by absolute decree
Of high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
Their own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
Which had no less proved certain unforeknown. (*Paradise Lost*, 3.114–19)

This is an apologetic argument I would more familiarly understand if its paradox was unwound in the form of ordinary philosophy or theology. But the effect here of ‘Foreknowledge’ at the beginning of the penultimate line in relation to ‘unforeknown’ at the end of the last one—together with ‘no influence’ and ‘no less’ in between them—sets the mind spinning. I could still paraphrase it: it makes no difference that I, God, could foresee it; the foreseeing is not what *made* it happen. But the mysterious effect is still nothing like that dead paraphrase: in the poetry it is more like the moment that Russell Hoban might call the ‘flicker’ between one reality and another. For the lines have almost become different levels of being, and the thought seems to *be* thought as if for the first time in human life

though coming from above it and translated down into it. The flicker, the great twist-and-turn-around in the lines

if I foreknew,
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
Which had no less proved certain unforeknown.

seems to make that final word and in particular the weight of its first syllable—*unforeknown*—not simply negative but a realization created within and by the language, and almost unextractable from it. At this poetic moment, transcendence is almost mind-burstingly contained within what is transcended; eternity held for a micro-second within the time it also oversees; the large within the small, the law found even in what is surprising. In *Paradise Lost* this thought is made primally alive, because imaginatively that epic is about the first times and their subsequent falling into usage.

‘The language-within-language’: it’s not just ‘close reading’

Douglas Oliver died in 2000. Into his critical work *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (1989) and his autobiographical mix of poetry and prose, *An Island That Is All The World* (1990), went a great deal of a life which he spent investigating the most minute spaces of time, within the lines of verse, almost as if secrets of the temporal universe were modelled or hidden there in those interstices.

Herrick’s famous lyric, for example, seems simple, its message of ‘seize the day’ a conventional enough topos:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying:
And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying.

But even here in its opening stanza what makes the little poem more than conventional is the movement between the end of line three (‘that smiles *today*’) and the beginning of the fourth line (‘*Tomorrow* will be dying’). For a fraction of a second—but repeatedly so every time you read it—you stay in that otherwise almost uninhabitable middle-most place between ‘today’ and ‘tomorrow’ as the one turns into the other so easily. Such a transitional pause between the lines and within the sentence exists in time but,

writes Douglas Oliver, 'it also exists outside time in a sort of minor, eternal present, a trembling instant which half stands still, partly resisting the flow of the line which creates it. It probably represents a little model.'¹² 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,' I once heard Ian McKellen's Macbeth repeat like a chant, 'Creeps in this petty pace from day to day | To—the last syllable of recorded time': that last 'to' took him over the brink beyond another to-day or any to-morrow.

Herrick's poem begins 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may', but what it comes to is 'And while ye may, go marry', four stanzas later. That shift of 'while ye may' from the end of one line to the beginning of the other at the poem's close, moves the meaning from threat to motive without changing the words but only their position. As if that were sometimes the only change to temporal facts that we can really make.

That subtle capacity to play off line against sentence is a powerful development of literacy itself. Studies have shown, says the novelist Siri Hustvedt, that the knowledge of the alphabet 'seems to strengthen the ability to understand speech as a series of discrete segments'.¹³ You can see words and their formation, not just speak them. Then the creation of clauses in prose, of lines in poetry exponentially increases this capacity to look for meaning, by using more extendedly discrete segments, without losing the temporal sense of the syntactic whole of which they are part.

Such analysis of this language-within-language, of the poetic work done within time, is something now falsely called and impatiently dismissed as old-fashioned 'close reading'—which sounds no better than what myopic old Mr Magoo would do, irritatingly, through pebble glasses. But really it is to do with wanting to know more of how a piece of writing works and see into what that working means—however awkward it is that the time it takes to think it out on paper is so much greater than the time it took for it to happen, so dynamically, in the first place. That is why poetry is itself a much-needed shorthand. Not everything can be fully spelt out, not in the midst of trying to articulate so much. A language-within-language therefore has to say *implicitly* to a reader: 'Take this line with that one', or 'Translate this small thing in passing into a large thing in being', or most often of all 'Ask yourself why this word, this turn,

this change is here'. And so it wants to draw the reader into the writerly process, with all its tacit shorthands and signals. Thus it is, for example, when Sir Walter Raleigh writes on his loss and his folly in affairs of the heart:

With wisdom's eyes had but blind fortune seen
Then had my love, my love for ever been.

The poem at this point innerly says: Feel in the middle of the last line the forward reading-movement become also for the moment a movement back, the language-within-language still secretly crying from its heart, 'my love, my love', like an extra clause created between the two.

This is more than just the learning of something of the writer's trade secrets (as here, in Raleigh, the rhetorical figure of epizeuxis, for example), where technique would be offered as a merely persuasive means to the communication of a definite end. As I have tried to demonstrate, the very processes of making and finding meaning are more intimately shared between careful writers and sympathetic readers than that account allows, and the language-within-language is itself crucial to that realized meaning. For Wordsworth, indeed, there was no part of the poet's craft that didn't turn into something human as he worked with it: the underlying rhythmic heart-beat of a poem was not just a matter for a learned expert in the variety of metres but the pulsating co-presence of something regular to support the irregular feelings above it, like a steadily varying ground on which to keep walking and thinking. To register such hidden inner meanings of the art is not, then, simply a specialist skill for a creative-writing course, or for a university degree in literature: it is a craft of reading and re-reading for any serious reader who needs to slow and stop, to understand more of the feeling, when something along the lines or the sentences suddenly and arrestingly matters.

In Cambridge, in the founding of literary studies in the 1920s and 1930s by I. A. Richards, Mansfield Forbes, and F. R. Leavis, close reading had been known as Practical Criticism. It is more the word 'practical' than the word 'criticism' I want to hold on to. For what is involved is reading in practice or in action, when the reader, attentively following a journey to meaning through line and sentence, is sensitized even to the ostensibly small and passing. Practical Criticism

was meant to be what we actually *do* when we read slowly, immersed in the midst of things, conscious of their syntactic twists and turns—not what we *say* we do, before or after the experience.

And herein lies the importance of the difference between what in Aristotle is known as *praxis* as compared with *technē*. *Technē* is what you get if you read a car manual. The manual teaches you the mechanics. You follow the instructions and you can repeat what it tells you: that's technique. Reading self-help books sometimes feels like this: how to cure your depression—step one... But *praxis* as in practical criticism isn't like that. *Praxis* has to do with what you cannot simply be told in advance or in theory; it is to do with abilities that you learn and accumulate in practice. Technique is programmed: crucially, it never adjusts. But the practice of reading does adjust to what is unpredictable, when reading easily and successively left-to-right has to give way, without announcement, to an alert openness, to surprise en route, even in the very midst of a sentence. Skills-based reading in schools is *technē*: it requires teachers to provide a do-it-yourself tool-kit of blunt instruments—trace the images, find the themes, research a bit of historical context.

Relatively unprogrammed, venturesome reading is attentive to what goes on inside a process without clear principles to start from or a destination easily in sight. (That is why *Flatland* is a great guide to what it feels like in working along the lines.) Such is the nature of a *praxis*. According to the eighteenth-century visionary philosopher Vico, these practices are the most genuine and reliable knowing that human beings have: we know most from what we have made and from what we have done, *in* the doing and *in* the making—so here, in the course of the writing and in the reading that follows its traces.¹⁴ We have all these large nouns with large expectations attached to them—such as hope, love, faith. But in *Four Quartets*, 'East Coker', T. S. Eliot austere says it is necessary to wait without these things when they are too large, too prematurely needed, too direct; but the faith, and the hope, and the love, he writes, are 'all *in* the waiting'.

And of course, if this patiently excited immersion in process is an effect of poetry, I do not mean to suggest that the poetry suddenly realized in its journey does not go on in prose, in fiction too. I can think of a hundred examples of this surprise and discovery amidst

the apparently prosaic, but two bare, little, yet austere mind-spinning instances may briefly serve.

In Graham Swift's novel *Wish You Were Here* (2011), there's a middle-aged man called Jack Luxton who is staring at a blank newspaper photograph of his younger brother Tom, killed in active service in Iran. The bereaved man finds himself wanting some 'indication in the face' that Tom might have known, at the time the photo had been taken, that one day his brother would look at it, as Jack does now intently. But (of course) there is no such sign, there never is in the world.

Or, three friends walk along the evening shore together in calm happiness at the close of Stanley Middleton's *Toward the Sea* (1995), wondering casually where they will all be in three years' time. The novel for a minute flashes forward to that future date, when in fact they will no longer be together, and then flashes back again, without irony, to their all still thinking this to have been a wonderful and unforgettable evening.

Necessarily, these two strange but recognizable moments at the macro-level of human story are accompanied and created by quietly equivalent verbal surprises at the micro-level. In Swift: 'And the expression was—expressionless'; in Middleton: 'and they walked on. In ignorance.' These non-happenings are, as it were, the impossible and unpotentiated shifts for people living along in time, below a metaphysical perspective they may suspect but cannot attain, in a kind of Flatland.

Original thinking

But there is a larger point to be made concerning Herrick and the novelists on the theme of time passing, or Milton and the novelists on freewill in the retrospective light of the future. What matters here is the way in which these chosen episodes are and are not 'original' thoughts. As a teacher nothing is much worse for me than when students are discouraged to find something they have read or have thought is already known and catalogued beforehand. It's a commonplace 'topos' in Elizabethan poetry, someone will helpfully tell them. Or they themselves will find in the secondary reading called research some critic who they think has already had 'their idea' far better than they ever will. (And so, in turn, the range of Ph.D. topics

narrows, in desperation for a new angle or niche, and there are perfectly intelligent young scholars encouraged to research into matter such as 'the imperialism of mahogany furniture in the novels of Charles Dickens').

It should not matter if a thought has been thought before: for the sake of their courage and their confidence the students need to know that it does not matter who previously may have had their idea, so long as this time the thoughts do indeed originate with themselves. To each his or her own realization. It should not be as it is with Hardy's Tess, afraid to study history:

what's the use of learning that I am one of a long row only—finding out that there is set down in some old book, somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad, that's all. The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been like thousands' and thousands', and that your coming life and doings'll be like thousands' and thousands'. (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, chapter 14)

That is the plight of passivity to the point of anonymity. It is like reading gone wrong: the power of identification turned into the diminishing and pre-emptive sense of mere biological repetition.

Literary-minded thinkers will not want to be repetitively formulaic, but the alternative is not that they have to be constantly concerned with novelty: writers needn't be, readers shouldn't have to be. That does not mean that all that literature has to offer is 'style', an ornamental way of dressing things up. That precisely is *not* what Pope meant when in his *Essay on Criticism* he wrote of 'what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed'. The poet there is rather the great representative, the reflective heightener of what is common: 'Something, whose truth convinced at sight we find | That gives us back the image of our mind' (298–300). And there remains something of Pope's Augustan sense of commonality in Wordsworth himself, for all his quarrel with Pope's diction.

For to Wordsworth an original thought is above all a thought that goes back to the origins of its thinking, to the deepest place it can come from, whether that thought seems apparently new or ostensibly familiar. Thinking about epitaphs, that primal mortal writing of marks inscribed on the permanence of stone and left to the bare external elements of the world, Wordsworth concludes that they

should contain thoughts and feelings which are commonplace, rather than fancily poetic or idiosyncratic, because fundamentally epitaphs belong to a universal human story from birth to death. But even with epitaphs, he goes on:

it is required that these truths should be instinctively ejaculated or should rise irresistibly from circumstances; in a word that they should be uttered in such connection as shall make it felt that they are not adopted, not spoken by rote, but perceived in their whole compass with the freshness and clearness of an original intuition. The Writer must introduce the truth with such accompaniment as shall imply that he has mounted to the sources of things, penetrated the dark cavern from which the river that murmurs in every one's ear has flowed from generation to generation.¹⁵

Yet unlike epitaphs, Poetry cannot afford its subjects to be taken for granted, when what it speaks for is so often unable to take care of itself. That is why for Wordsworth poetry is like a *second* form of epitaph, a stronger and more individual verbal defence for the sake of the memories it seeks to create, support, and preserve. But in both poetry and epitaph, it is still the source of things that he wants to include even in the midst of things, 'the freshness and clearness of an original intuition'. It does not matter if what is written has been thought before: at the moment of articulation the thought is sheerly in the present tense, brought to life as for the first time. Being that comes *before* knowing, the realization of an ontology ahead of any epistemology that arises out of it: that is the priority here.

What is therefore wonderful about the examples and instances I have cited, and what makes them original again in Wordsworth's sense, is that they all seem to be configured so as to make their words seem called for, coming therefore at the *right* time—when they are newly meant because really needed. It is like the epitaphic speech near the end of *Macbeth* when the wearied, beaten protagonist seems to be as much hearing, as speaking, his own report:

My way of life

Is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends
I must not look to have... (5.3.24–8)

When you read it well, out loud, it feels as though you have almost to *wait* for the right instant to add, across the line, that belated, stranded, and inevitable blow—'I must not look to have'. En route to it, in that killingly slow list, the man feels all over again the meaning of what he once more loses in the naming of it. Like death, that delayed main verbal clause ('I must not look to have') is bound to come; but it also hangs there in what Douglas Oliver called a minor eternal present, out of the resolution of which a lifetime is won or lost on the earth.

In literature and in thinking about literature, what is great is when thoughts—even terrible thoughts—seem triggered by the feel of the sheer situation that is amassing. Then they feel called for, mandated by the moment, when more usually in the cool climate of notional existence intelligence offers what seems only plausible rather than urgently necessary, and our thoughts can feel arbitrary or neglected. But poetic-like occasions are what thought truly exists for, as William James describes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

We have a thought, or we perform an act, repeatedly, but on a certain day the real meaning of the thought peals through us for the first time, or the act has suddenly turned into a moral impossibility. All we know is that there are dead feelings, dead ideas, and cold beliefs, and there are hot and live ones; and when one grows hot and alive within us, everything has to recrystallize about it. (Lecture 9 'Conversion')

These hot spots suddenly become centres of redirected energy and, out of that gathering, centres of a relocated self. They are, says James, models of new realization—creating inner constellations of freshly re-configured thoughts, rapid shifts of energy or gravity to these new centres. In literature we have the privilege of seeing these thoughts forming and re-forming themselves, through their verbal forms and syntactic pathways.

What is mortally heartening, moreover, is James's sense of the continuity of such moments with more ordinary occurrences of change. He writes: 'Our ordinary alterations of character as we pass from one of our aims to another are not commonly called transformations, because each of them is so rapidly succeeded by another in the reverse direction.' But these small, common movements of emotional alternation are the neural foundation for a larger transformation if a

suddenly created centre becomes magnetically powerful. Further, they are the basis for the experience of radical conversion if that centre expels definitively its rivals and alternatives.

Consider, in this light, the great fifth-act change, the slowed reconciliation of mind finally achieved by a Hamlet no longer at the mercy of what will happen to him. There is nothing here in any single one of these three or four prose sentences that seems particularly 'original', at the level of novelty:

If it be now, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.

This is not static thought, the sort you can apply at any time; but thought in motion summoned at a critical stage in a life. As a reader you cannot therefore easily put your finger on it, and yet somewhere in the midst of readings-in-time, the whole (or 'all') becomes far more than its several parts (each 'not'). It is as if what is successive in time can be existent simultaneously at some higher level of thought. This is what the unexceptional characters in Graham Swift or Stanley Middleton could not attain. But what Douglas Oliver wrote of some lines from *The Merchant of Venice* applies equally in the case of this speech of Hamlet's: 'Once or twice in my life, I have read these lines to myself and discovered a strange sliding sensation in my consciousness.' It is fashionable to talk, after Csikszentmihalyi, of being in 'the flow', the thick of concentrated experience, but in its sliding this poetic language *is* the flow in the midst of life: If it be now/'tis not to come; if it be not to come/it will be now; if it be not now/yet it will come. These lines about time take their own time now, for at each rhythmic pause or stress, as Douglas Oliver puts it, there is a temporal glide in my mind, as if I had extra time to choose when to pronounce a vowel or a consonant or decide a duration. It makes me feel how immensely gifted and versatile poetically I *could* be, although it is really Shakespeare who has placed that potential in me.¹⁶

'I must not look to have', 'Yet it *will* come.' In the readiness of all, the words themselves seem ready when they do come. There is not just a character here, a Macbeth or Hamlet, but a mind created on the page, working out where that character now is in the realms of life. And so-called close reading is like a probe trying equivalently to

work out the unspoken and unspeakable movements of the stimulated brain-work that underlyingly enables the meaning. 'Thought in its dumb cradles' as Shakespeare himself calls it in *Troilus and Cressida* (3.3.193).

Too easily dismissed as old-fashioned nit-picking, or a practice too naively unsuspecting without theory and knowledge to support it, such reading is a version of brain-imaging, as argued in Chapter 1, is the humanities' mind-and-brain science. The apparently small things with which this reading is concerned—a word-shift here, an infinitesimal pause there—are really big things happening at such an unavoidably transient pace as makes them hard even to talk or think about. But they need to be, for that very reason. To put it another way, reading intently is like 'creative writing' done the other way round: not going forward from tacit mentality into the making of words but working backward from the making of words into the mentality implicit within, behind, and beneath them. Reading-in-the-midst of things is the great venture for making out meaning in its very happening.

3. Realizations

Literature, and the thinking that comes out of literature, can only *do* its work, without those guaranteed safeguards or secure foundations it can solely find in the doing. In the creative world in which reading involves us, from the midst of things as I have said, there is less time for knowing in advance, less room for having set opinions and pre-arranged categories. Investigative readers, like writers, need to keep as close as they can to their blind nerves, to the deep internal instincts that seem triggered by the immersion in books, quite before any arrival at a fuller, more familiar sense of their meaning. The best work is thus done not at macro-level from top-down, but as Oliver Sacks describes it, by 'sudden ascents from one level to the next, each level inconceivable to the level below'.¹⁷

That is not to say, however, that in this literary *ethos*, as I have called it, there is no place for beliefs but only non-committal possibilities instead. Granted: in the crucible of the work, beliefs and intentions and plans and foreseings must as far as it is possible *not*

be imposed; they have to re-emerge, to re-assemble themselves in dynamic memory, to be realized again (in both senses of that word) through the tests and calls of a specific situation. But without them, and without the opportunity for emotional discovery, it's the post-modern game of playing around among possibilities none of which actually matters.

Ruskin's help: on realizing the whole

To conclude, I turn to another of those primitive aboriginal human oaks, the Victorian art critic and social thinker John Ruskin. In particular I am thinking of an important moment that occurs oddly but characteristically in a long footnote towards the end of the fifth and final volume of *Modern Painters* (1860), as though he hardly knew where to put an incidental thought that actually took an overview of his work.

In this footnote, looking back across his writings on art as a whole, Ruskin reports how he has often found himself saying several apparently contradictory or ill-fitting things, all of which seem to him separately true, only in different contexts or at different times. Actually, the thought-provoking, simmering messiness of his work rather delighted him, as a trustworthy alternative to the lifelessness of boringly predictable and repeated consistency. It felt analogous to the situation of his beloved Turner on varnishing day immediately before the opening of the Royal Academy exhibition, when only at the very last moment, he would interconnect all the scattered and indistinct parts of his painting, and bring the whole into light with one final touch. Writes Ruskin:

I do not wonder at people sometimes thinking I contradict myself when they come suddenly on any of the scattered passages, in which I was forced to insist on the opposite practical applications of subtle principles.

And yet all these apparently contradictory passages, says Ruskin with great defiant gusto, are perfectly accurate and just:

The essential thing for the reader is to receive their truth, however little he may be able to see their consistency. If truths of apparently contrary character are candidly and rightly received, they will fit themselves together in the mind without any trouble. (*Modern Painters*, vol. v part 9, chapter 7, footnote to para. 23)

Ruskin trusts the awkward differences between the contradictory thoughts that arise on different occasions, on the grounds that such independent realities are proof that he hasn't set them all up together, through some temptation to force a fictively unified consistency. Receive the truths *before* you look for their consistency, he urges in his unapologetic didacticism: otherwise you will never see anything that is not immediately consistent with what you already think. It is the order of things that matters, and it is not an abstract logical order. Only *after* you have received the several truths, will they then *fit themselves* together if indeed they are substantially true. Brought together in mind, it will be as though the combined and contending energy of these several ideas will of itself call forth the thought and the syntax that may rightly connect them.

That is to say: you don't have to go into every situation trying consciously to 'remember' what your principles are, for that would mean they were not really principles. And certainly not principles that are indeed 'subtle' in that deep sense to which Ruskin refers. Subtle principles are not simply definable, are not narrow statements of intent, but are lodged as working orientations within and beneath your actions and your passions and your praxis. In an awakened ontology and an honourable ethos, principle and knowledge are like events which return, I have argued, as if happening for the first time again: the painting, the mountain, the cathedral, the great idea, seen at the right distance, suddenly gathers itself and raises its weight into a whole. This sudden integration feels less like a top-down directive than the creation and re-creation of the materials of life from below upwards, from founding sources.

In *The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist* (2011) Orhan Pamuk offers the belief that even as they go along in time as horizontal linear narratives, novels have hidden within their architecture a secret inner centre, a hidden connecting keystone, for which readers must seek. It may be the coalescing moment in Dickens's *Bleak House* when suddenly after 700 pages, the novel's deep emotional centre re-emerges in of all unlikely places, the hitherto effete old aristocrat, Sir Leicester Dedlock, made paralyzed by his wife's guilty desertion: 'After vainly trying to make himself known in speech, he makes signs for a pencil.... Sir Leicester writes upon the slate, "Full

forgiveness'. Or it may rest in what is generated in the space between the characters in *Great Expectations*: Biddy asking Pip, when he says how unsuitable his new upper-class life will be to lowly Joe Gargery, the man who has looked out for him all his previous life: 'Don't you think he knows that?' Alternatively the centre may lie in what *never* happens—between Lydgate and Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, or Levin and Anna in *Anna Karenina*. Or in an idea that could pass for incidental detail but isn't, like Conrad's MacWhirr relieved to find a little box of matches in the place they should be even at the height of the typhoon. Such things are like the very end of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, when the painter Lily Briscoe suddenly finishes her picture with a single stroke, drawing 'a line there, in the centre'.

It isn't just novels that thus gather and disclose themselves from the midst of within. A play such as *As You Like It* gradually forms and then finally reveals the centre of its own network. Rosalind, disguised as the young man Ganymede, has been saying to her would-be beloved Orlando, again and again, to this effect: 'What if I *were* the Rosalind you love? Pretend I am: suppose I am. Can't you still think of me as her?' To which Orlando finally and magnificently bursts out, like an anti-Hamlet:

I can live no longer by thinking. (5.2.50)

It is no thoughtless affirmation; it is the force of life itself speaking through him on behalf of the deepest meaning of Shakespearean comedy. This too is Dickens's model: that a character will erupt out of the dense medium of the crowded novel momentarily to claim and gather together the whole. And if not, then the character, like Barnardine in *Measure of Measure*, may decline to fit his life conventionally to the plot, insisting that somewhere still the part can be definedly more than the whole: 'I swear I will not die today, for any man's persuasion' (4.3.56). In Dickens, particularly the later Dickens from *Little Dorrit* onwards, the whole is then re-created anew when the character finds he or she cannot be wholly free but is tied to a larger ramifying society. Or when the network of that novel silently asks its reader morally to compare, via Clennam who knows them both, the false artist Henry Gowan with the great engineer Daniel Doyce.

The structural dynamic here has to do with the pattern Ruskin describes in one of his prefaces. Generalization as commonly understood is, he asserts in all the joy of his aggression, 'the act of a vulgar, incapable, and unthinking mind':

To see in all mountains nothing but similar heaps of earth; in all rocks, nothing but similar concretions of solid matter; in all trees, nothing but similar accumulations of leaves, is no sign of high feeling or extended thought. The more we know and the more we feel, the more we separate...

But, he goes on, significantly, to a second move:

we separate to obtain a more perfect unity. Stones, in the thoughts of the peasant, lie as they do on his field; one is like another, and there is no connection between any of them. The geologist distinguishes, and in distinguishing connects them. Each becomes different from his fellow, but in differing from, forms a relation to, his fellow; they are no more each the repetition of the other, they are parts of a system; and each implies and is connected with the existence of the rest.¹⁸

That is what makes a true generalization—when Ruskin follows Wordsworth (in the great 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads') in recognizing the perception of dissimilitude in similitude, of similitude in dissimilitude as the great reproductive principle of life itself. No sameness without difference, but no difference without sameness; no repetition without variation and vice versa: this is the law of creation and re-creation. It is what makes for what Wordsworth calls 'connections finer than those of contrast', as in the generation of an underlying syntax by which 'each in differing from, forms a relation to, his fellow'. That is how suddenly in the life of a novel, a drama, or a poem, parts cry to other parts across their distance, characters call to each other through their diversity, a movement in one place creates another separate shift elsewhere, and books themselves find readers through the compelling mixture of their likeness and their difference.

Ruskin's help again: on the medium of paint

Only interested in the great fundamentals but willing to seek for them through the density of minute particulars, Ruskin was just as capable as was Tolstoy of daring to write a book called *What*

Is Art? For Ruskin, art meant above all painting, though painting made him a great writer. And before I end this chapter with an attempt at some literary conclusions, I want to travel with Ruskin across the disciplines into his own chosen art-form because, as I shall argue in Chapter 3, it is important to go away before returning home.

Ruskin puritanically hated establishment 'Art' with a capital A: meaning, an artificially specialized second-order activity, self-contained and self-sustaining, which allowed a painter to produce a perfectly 'good' painting without ever having to enquire into art's original purpose. He loathed it when a painter over-filled the space and too-completely 'finished' his painting. This was getting in the way of the imagination as his beloved Turner never did in the suggestiveness of his brush-strokes. 'You are coming *between* me and nature,' Ruskin would want to cry impatiently to the over-precise, over-picturesque professional:

He is like a dull story-teller, dwelling on points which the hearer anticipates or disregards. The imagination will say to him: 'I knew all that before; I don't want to be told that. Go on; or be silent, and let me go on in my own way.'

It may sound like a paradox for one who so vehemently claimed not to be an aesthete, but precisely for that reason what Ruskin needed was to see that a painting was confessedly a *painting*—not an ostensibly transparent, overly professionalized picture presented like a painted window on the world to be passively looked through; but art as a trigger for imaginative vision. He knew it was indeed art-as-imagination, when he looked at Turner's 'Snow-Storm: Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth'—it was like looking into the very eye of the storm, at the centre of which the ship is helplessly trapped amidst an intermingled turmoil of indistinguishable sea and sky. Yet when he closely examined the whole surface all he could see were the violent obtrusive sweeps and marks of the brush, black paint flecked with white wildly in an immense confusion:

a good painter is obliged, working near his picture, to do in everything only about half of what he wants, the rest being done by the distance.... Hence the amazement and blank wonder of the public at some of the finest passages of Turner, which look like a mere meaningless and disorderly work of

chance: but rightly understood, are preparations for a given result, like the most subtle moves of a game of chess, of which no by-stander can for a long time see the intention, but which are, in dim, underhand, wonderful way, bringing out their foreseen and inevitable result. (*Modern Painters*, vol. iv, chapter 4, paragraph 14)

That is to say: when, as the painter's light urged him, Ruskin stared into the centre of it all, suddenly the picture *happened*, was transformed. A seemingly less material dimension was created out of the very materials of two-dimensional suggestion, and the whole came to life. The brush-strokes, without ever appearing to be any less brush-strokes, changed into meaning, into sea and sky and air and water whipped into one, became a painting. And that was the moment of visual realization to Ruskin, when paint and imagination *crossed over*, when the mere brush-stroke and what it was meant to represent flickered to and fro, as if disclosing the secret origin of art itself by the smallest and slenderest of possible means:

The more subtle the power of the artist, the more curious the difference will be between the apparent means and the effect produced. (*Modern Painters*, vol. iv, chapter 4, paragraph 15)

Turner had made his painting work like that by not over-polishing it, by undisguisedly exposing the apparent means instead—making the rough and imperfect flicker of paint itself part of the extended language:

Everything imperfectly realised (as, for instance, by a mere outline of a tree) necessarily makes us think not only of the thing itself, but of the sort of stroke or mark which represents it. If art were perfect, it could not be distinguished from the reality.¹⁹

But it is important for Ruskin that art is not simply identical with the reality:

Painting has its peculiar virtues, not only consistent with, but even resulting from, its shortcomings and weaknesses. (*Modern Painters*, vol. iii, chapter 10, paragraph 7)

This again is art's language-within-language that implicitly says as it were, I am a painting—which is to say: I am a human effort

within painting that uses paint to try to signal something beyond painting.²⁰

Such tacit cross-over messages from within a work remain in touch with the origins of art. The archaeologist Steven Mithen talks of the discovery of artefacts from the prehistory of art: 'A shell was also a bead. A piece of wood was also a musical instrument. Charcoal and ochre marks on a wall were also a rhinoceros.'²⁰ No wonder then, we might conclude, that metaphor seems so close to something crucial to art when art's very instruments are at once themselves *and* something else, flickering between the two.

What in literature are the equivalent of those marks on the wall, those distinct brush-strokes, or that visible process of amazingly shared transformation from one thing into another?

Examples of literature's place of awakening

Here are my two final examples, in answer: from a novel and from a poem-sequence.

In Graham Swift's *Wish You Were Here*, Jack Luxton is an exceptionally lost and baffled man who does not speak much and is not very used to his own thoughts. Yet, supposing himself to be on the verge of suicide, he remembers without apparent reason a regular journey he would make with the family dog in the back of the pick-up to see the girlfriend who was to become, somewhat unhappily at times, his future wife.

We have already read of this trip of young excitement 200 pages earlier. But now it comes back and Jack realizes, oddly, that at the time he had not known—and of course, could not possibly have known—that the memory of 'his doing just what he was doing' at that time might turn out to be 'one of his last thoughts'. Even so, he also recalls that that same dog when aged and sick had seemed to know in advance, for just a split-second, that Jack's father, the old farmer, was going to have to shoot him. At the very last moment, Jack recalls without certainty, the dog had perhaps very slightly lowered his head.

At any rate, by one of those strange loops of time that Thomas Hardy knew so well, something that existed unremarkably in its own

right, a journey with a still lively dog, returns at a different level to signify—what? not quite a symbol but whatever it is that a lifetime means. Its coming back has turned it into an inarticulate man's dumb second language, a brush-stroke with which to paint a miniature. Even in this austere minimalism, what Graham Swift gently offers is the peculiar experience of reality-shifts, a flicker to-and-fro, the sensation of a familiar pattern surfacing through strangeness. A little word here or there, and it is like a poetry bringing the novel together.

My second example is poetry, conversely, from a sequence that is like a story from a novel. An unattractive and sickly woman suddenly finds herself loving and beloved, when she had long given up any such hope. It is not a straightforward narrative: being as it is almost too good to be true, too wonderful to bear, too painfully new to be realized, she cannot simply and immediately accept this love with the delight she knows she should. Elizabeth Barrett Browning needs poetry to manage and to trust her own extraordinary transition into unexpected happiness. Love is beautiful, she writes, though I myself am not, and

when I say at need
I love thee...mark...*I love thee*—in thy sight
 I stand transfigured, glorified aright,
 With conscience of the new rays that proceed
 Out of my face towards thine....
 And what I *feel*, across the inferior features
 Of what I *am*, doth flash itself

('Sonnets from the Portuguese', 10)

There are in this verse two beautiful little models, two fine images, of poetry itself.

One is to do with how poetry is achieved near the very boundary of human limitation, when (as Ruskin suggests) limitation is precisely the trigger for imagination. Here the woman is naturally limited by being bound inside herself (she is physically a separate self, who cannot see her own face), and limited again psychologically by her inner sense of herself as outwardly plain. The poem comes out of her knowing her own face to be transformed by her sight of *his* looking at her love for him. That is poetry on the mind-spinning verge of the impossible—which is what it seems here. The

woman only knows what she has given out by receiving it back, with gratitude.

The other is to do with the words, like brush-strokes, in the flicker of an instant turning into what they stand for, without ever ceasing to be themselves. I say 'I love thee'—and—(I do) '*I love thee*'. In its visible textuality, it is in its own way like Hopkins in 'Carrion Comfort' saying finally, in terror: 'I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God'. That first '(my God!)' in Hopkins and that second 'I love thee' in Barrett Browning are language-within-language: a second language raised upon and realized through the first until it reaches the fullest out-burst of its own meaning. It is then that the words are not just something within the separate realm of art, merely left to themselves inside a poem. They have found and created a special space for their meaning on the almost impossible boundary between two realms, like Turner's still present brush-strokes. Literary language summons the presence of what it refers to. And the words that have most present reality, created on the back of other words—(my God!); *I love thee*—lift themselves so as actually to exist in that realm *between* art and life which art itself exists to create.

Or to put it more simply, through the resonant brevity of art again. In what poses as a children's book, one of Russell Hoban's heroes, required to handle a task too big for him, feels he has been mistaken for a shaman when really he is but a shamed man. During his strange quest, as a bad man seeking to do one final good thing, he asks his mentor what realm is he in: whether he is alive or dead, whether he is awake or still living within his dream. I don't know, she replies, 'But I don't think it makes any difference, you just have to face it however it comes to you.'²¹

That is when the fictional becomes real.

Notes

1. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, first published 1902 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 186.
2. I am indebted to Catherine Pickstock for the term in her *After Writing* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).
3. Kenelm Digby, *Two Treatises* (1644), quoted in John L. Russell, 'Action and Reaction Before Newton', *British Journal for the History of Science* 9 (1976), 25–38.

4. I. A. Richards, *Beyond* (New York: Harcourt, 1974), 95–6.
5. Adam Phillips, *On Balance* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010), 205.
6. John Morley, *Nineteenth-Century Essays*, ed. Peter Stansky (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 309 ('The Life of George Eliot' also reprinted in Morley's *Critical Miscellanies* (1888), vol. iii).
7. Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 34.
8. Graham Greene, *A Sort of Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 25.
9. *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (London: Penguin, 1998), 107, 112.
10. Thomas De Quincey, *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets* (1834–40), ed. David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 161.
11. Letter to Anselm Berrigan: <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2009/10/poetry-and-narrative-in-performance-part-1/>>.
12. Douglas Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 19.
13. Siri Hustvedt, *Living, Thinking, Looking* (London: Sceptre, 2012), 133 ('On Reading').
14. Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder* (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), 122.
15. *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), ii, 78–9.
16. Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance*, 82.
17. Oliver Sacks, *A Leg to Stand On* (London: Picador, 1986), 141.
18. John Ruskin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Philip Davis (London: Everyman, J. M. Dent, 1995), 45 (to be found in E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds.), *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin* (London: George Allen, 1903–12), iii, 7–8).
19. Ruskin, *Selected Writings*, 114–15 (Cook and Wedderburn, *Library Edition*, vii, 358–60).
20. I am indebted here to Keith Oatley, *Such Stuff as Dreams* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 29.
21. Russell Hoban, *Soonchild* (London: Walker Books, 2012), 51.

3

The Holding-Ground and the World

Introduction

The achievement of movements

At the very last moment in the sacrifice of Isaac, an angel of the Lord intercedes to stop Abraham as he raises the knife, and substitute a ram in place of his son. This starkly externalized ancient narrative is, as one great reader has put it, 'fraught with background', but it is a background left unexpressed—the thoughts, feelings, and motivation behind the austere authority of the bare history only suggested by the silence amidst the fragmentary speeches.¹ In his imaginative back-filling of the biblical text, what especially amazed Kierkegaard was Abraham's instant reaction to this sudden release of Isaac. Abraham seems to receive his son back with an immediate forgetfulness of all he has been forced to go through and with an instantly heart-felt joy. He needed no time to come to terms with the relief, says Kierkegaard, no transitional preparation to return from the realm of the infinite and the absolute, back down again to the common land of finitude. Kierkegaard confesses that for himself he could never have made that sudden shift in one pure go, without resentment for the past. It would have taken him at least two mental movements to readjust to the sudden present:

I could easily fill a whole book with the various misunderstandings, awkward positions, and slovenly movements I have encountered in just my own slight experience. People believe very little in spirit, yet it is precisely spirit that is needed to make this movement; what matters is its not being a one-sided result of a frigid, sterile necessity; the more it is that, the more doubtful it always is that the movement is proper.²