The Vagabond Spirit of Poetry

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Note on Texts

I have quoted poets from modern editions of their works that keep original spelling and punctuation. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from long poems or illuminated books, provided with book, canto or plate, and stanza or line, numbering, are taken from Homer 2003, Hesiod 2006-7, Virgil 1999-2000, Ovid 1904, Shantideva 2006, Dante 1996-2011, Spenser 1912, Milton 2007b, Pope 2005, Akenside 2000, Cowper 1971, Blake 2004, Wordsworth 2009, and Tennyson 1894. Shakespeare is quoted from Herbert Farjeon's edition of *The Complete Works* (1953); act, scene and line numbering, as well as the titles of plays, are from the 'The Globe Edition' (1891), allowing readers to find quotations easily in any *Complete Works*. Unless otherwise stated, Bible citations are from the King James Version: 1611 Edition (2010). Page numbers are given for quotations from all other works, which are listed in the Bibliography.

Personal Polemical Prologue

Indolence, industry and quick intuition

Between 11th and 13th July 1798 the day had come for William Wordsworth: 'when I again repose | Here, under this dark sycamore' (2009: 1. 372). The indolent poet was in his late twenties and on a walking tour up and down the Wye Valley, which divides Wales and England, whiling away the time between an unemployed season in a rented country mansion and a planned trip to Germany. He was probably wearing striped pantaloons. A younger admirer remembered him earlier that year dressed 'according to the *costume* of that unconstrained period', making 'havoc of the half of a Cheshire cheese', priding himself in his '"knowledge of the good things of this life"' (Hazlitt 1982: 58-9). With a mediocre degree from Cambridge and no career or fortune to speak of, Wordsworth was enjoying high summer. He was taking things slowly.

Who now reposes? Who has the time? Judging from the lists of quotations under the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, people were happily reposing in different ways from the sixteenth century up until about 1914, and then the verb falls out of circulation. Perhaps the First World War took away our repose. Can it be that since the beginning of the twentieth century we have known little cessation from work? Things have speeded up. 'Repose' is far too antiquated a word for the modern world. To repose is to lie down in rest, in perfect idleness against a tree, for example. Only the dead now seem to get away with reposing. We have forgotten that to repose is also to recover from and recharge, as one of Wordsworth's

favourite eighteenth-century poets, William Cowper, well knew: day-dreaming by a winter's fire while a snow storm brews outside, 'Tis thus the understanding takes repose | In indolent vacuity of thought, | And sleeps and is refresh'd' (*The Task*, IV. 296-8).

It is precisely such refreshing repose that is taken away from Macbeth and Banquo, after their encounter with the witches, in that most prophetic of Shakespeare's plays. 'Good repose the while', wishes Macbeth, the night that he will kill the king, to the friend that he will later have murdered. 'Thankes Sir: the like to you', wishes Banquo back (*Macbeth*, II. i. 29-30). The dramatic irony of this short interchange is savage: once Banquo has been dispatched to his ultimate repose his ghost will not let Macbeth rest until he too dies. Of all Shakespeare's characters, Macbeth finds the least repose in this world; as soon as Banquo leaves him to go to bed, he will have his 'fatall Vision' (II. i. 36) of a dagger. Later on he is at once scared, exhilarated and caught up by his play's acceleration of 'Time' that 'anticipat'st my dread exploits' (IV. i. 144). Macbeth's world is suddenly speeded-up when he becomes King; he thinks that 'Time' performs actions before we have time to act: 'The flighty purpose never is o're-tooke | Unless the deed go with it' (IV. i. 145-6), that is, an intention must be carried out instantly or it will be too late. The frightening thing is that these days we are living in Macbeth's castle, which I see as a prophetic emblem of our industrialized world. Macbeth is an apocalyptic multitasker, plagued by stressful thoughts about the future. Like him we have lost our repose in a Hell of our own making.

I must confess that I awoke in the middle of the night to write these paragraphs, plagued by stressful thoughts about the day's tasks. At least writing about slowness and poetry helps me to gain some composure and embrace that which Wallace

Stevens named 'the object of || The hum of thoughts evaded in the mind' (1954: 388). I have begun writing this book in a state of mild anxiety, fitting it in as a task among too many others, but my project is to discover how imagination, enlightened by reposeful reverie, puts reason to work in a divine, rather than a merely human, manner.

For years now Milan Kundera's questions at the beginning of his novel *Slowness* have echoed around my imagination:

> Why has the pleasure of slowness disappeared? Ah, where have they gone, the amblers of yesteryear? Where have they gone, those loafing heroes of folk song, those vagabonds who roam from one mill to another and bed down under the stars? Have they vanished along with footpaths, with grasslands and clearings, with nature? There is a Czech proverb that describes their easy indolence by a metaphor: 'They are gazing at God's windows.' A person gazing at God's windows is not bored; he is happy. In our world, indolence has turned into having nothing to do, which is a completely different thing: a person with nothing to do is frustrated, bored, is constantly searching for the activity he lacks. (1996: 4-5)

Macbeth was bored perhaps, but, ambitiously searching for the political activity he lacked, he ended up despairing about 'To morrow, and to morrow, and to morrow' (V. v. 19). Wordsworth is productively indolent, reposing on the precious breast of visionary creativity. How can we become loafing heroes in our frenetic modern world? How can we find the time to gaze at God's windows?

W. B. Yeats called William Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, which Blake illustrated himself, 'illuminated missals of song in which every page is a window open in Heaven'. Such windows are:

> open not as in the days of Noah for the outpouring of the flood 'of time and space,' but that we may look into 'the golden age' and 'the imagination that liveth for ever,' and talk with those who dwell there by 'Poetry, Painting, and Music, the three powers in man of conversing with Paradise which the flood did not sweep away.' (Blake 2002: xxix)

Yeats is quoting from Blake's 'A Vision of The Last Judgment' (2008: 559). The slow and indolent art of reading poems allows us to gaze at God's windows, to converse with characters in 'Paradise'.

Slowness is not just about being less fast. In fact, the peculiar slowness that poetry can demand of its readers preludes a certain kind of inner acceleration. At that moment we are gathered by the 'intensest rendezvous', and feel the quickening of 'A light, a power, the miraculous influence', as Stevens recognizes in a late poem called 'Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour'. Such intuitive conversations are when 'We say God and the imagination are one …' They come swiftly after we have slowed down for a spell, by resting, for example, 'as in a room', or in the clearing, of a poem (1954: 524).

Who are the loafing heroes of folk song? I think of the ballad supposedly 'compos-ed by Spencer the Rover', a man with money problems who left his young family to rove around Yorkshire:

> Till being weary of rambling, he sat down to rest
> At the foot of yon' mountain there runs a clear flowing fountain
> Of bread and cold water himself did refresh.
>
> With the night fast approaching, to the woods he resorted
> With wood, vine and ivy his bed for to make
> But he dreamt about sighing, lamenting and crying

> Go home to your family and rambling forsake. (see Roud 2012: 210)

By slowing down, even bedding down, under the stars, Spencer the Rover finds the strength to return to the 'prittle prattling stories' of his children, which also help 'to drive care away'. His indolent loafing, shunning care for a spell, which may seem merely irresponsible to some, actually leads to a kind of mystical experience in the wood, a dream from which he can return to the everyday world refreshed to accept his responsibilities as a father. Such are the beneficent effects of slow indolence, and I would argue that reading a poem allows us to embark in miniature on a journey similar to that of Spencer the Rover. A poem takes us temporarily out of our everyday world, but we return from such an excursion renewed to face practical challenges; patiently to act again, not as 'a poore Player | That struts and frets his houre upon the Stage' (*Macbeth*, V. v. 24-5), but feeling 'A presence that disturbs me with the joy | Of elevated thoughts' (Wordsworth 2009: 1. 374-5).

Some of Shakespeare's finest characters are loafing heroes who seem to have strolled straight out of folk song. The fantastic rogue Autolycus, for example, first enters the very late play, *The Winter's Tale*, while improvising a song from which Macbeth would do well to learn. Autolycus tells us that he once served the Prince, wearing a fine livery of velvet, 'but now I am out of service':

> *But shall I go mourne for that (my deere)*
> *the pale Moone shines by night:*
> *And when I wander here, and there*
> *I then do most go right*. (IV. iii. 15-8)

We have happened upon another ballad full of sense, another

hero who knows all about the pleasures of slowness. A modern editor of *The Winter's Tale* offers an almost cynical gloss of Autolycus' lines: 'But shall I worry about that [i.e. having lost my job with the prince]? On moonlight nights when I go where I like [and steal what I can] then I am living the life which is the one for me'; 'to travel without a destination is the vagabond's principle' (Shakespeare 2006: 81). But such an interpretation pays attention merely to the worldly meaning of Autolycus' song. It is too hasty a reading. We should remember that Shakespeare's lines face God's windows as much as they face the world. And in that case we might try and read him as a vagabond would. Such is the hope of this book: that we can learn to read great poetry as visionary vagabonds might.

Autolycus is not just singing about the pleasures of the life of a vagabond; he is affirming the virtues of slowness for us all. His name means 'the wolf himself' and I believe that Shakespeare speaks through this character to affirm, as Robert Graves will in the twentieth century, that 'The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites', which, as we have seen, Stevens describes as 'the miraculous influence' (1999: 10): the inner acceleration of the 'intensest rendezvous' with the 'Interior Paramour'. The Muse is symbolized by 'the pale Moone': Autolycus' song today can function as a warning to us that our commitment to the fast-paced 'industrial machine' prevents us from rendering the slow and whole-hearted service that the White Goddess requires, if we are each truly to be quickened from within, rather than merely possessed by our demons.

To be possessed by demons today, ironically, is not to believe in the supernatural cause of everything, or what Blake called 'Imagination' (*Jerusalem*, Plate 5. 20), the ground of all creation: that 'divine force' (1968: sig. B4^{v}) that Sir Philip

Sidney understood inheres also in poetry. Blake thought of disbelief as demonic: we are possessed by demons unwittingly when we only affirm the reality of the world that we can see around us and deny the existence of the eternal realms of 'Imagination'.

When I talk of the supernatural in this book I mean that which is above nature and which rules nature. In Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* this primordial power reveals itself in visionary dream, and comes as a response to Lucius' desperate prayer to be transformed from the shape of an ass. Apuleius calls this divine force Isis but she says herself:

> I am Nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead, queen also of the immortals, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are. My nod governs the shining heights of Heaven, the wholesome sea-breezes, the lamentable silences of the world below. Though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names, and propitiated with all manner of different rites, yet the whole round earth venerates me. (1964: 271)

That which is 'sovereign of all things spiritual' is also 'Nature' because, as Blake understood, 'every thing that lives is Holy' (2004: 133). A modern scientist would argue that such a statement is meaningless: life is just one way that matter can behave, which we can observe and quantify. Rational atheism would deprive man of experience of the holy. But, as Kathleen Raine emphasizes, Lucius' mixed feelings of joy and terror and wonder in the presence of Isis 'are experiences which fall within the range of our humanity' (1991: 28). Blake would have understood that when the ass prays to Isis, he is waking up from the slumber of materialism to Imagination, 'the land of

life', and his eventual transformation back to a man, effected by Isis, symbolizes this process. In poems like Stevens' 'Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour' Isis shows us on earth that 'the human Imagination is the divine in man' as it engages with reality: 'Eternity is the Imaginative vision; and Imagination is "the Saviour"' (Raine 1991: 23 and 28).

Luckily for us, poetry is littered with loafing heroes from whom we can learn about the supernatural cause of everything. In Theocritus' seventh Idyll, written in the third century BC, we encounter Lycidas who appears to be a goatherd, dressed as he is in a shaggy goat's fleece smelling of new-made rennet; his ancient shirt fastened with a broad belt, a curved stick of wild olive wood in his right hand. The speaker of the poem, Simichidas, who may or may or not be Theocritus himself, on the way to a harvest festival, overtook this goatherd, and Lycidas, quietly, broadly, and with a twinkling eye grinned at him; 'laughter touched his lip as he spoke':

> 'Where are you off to, Simichidas, in the noonday heat,
> Bustling along, even when the lizard sleeps in the wall,
> And tomb-haunting larks look to find their rest?
> Such haste – have you invited yourself to dinner somewhere,
> Or to sample a townsman's wine jar? At the pace you're going
> The pebbles sing as they spurt from under your boots.' (2008: 25)

Lycidas' sudden appearance and charmed smile suggest divinity; his very name, which shares the same root of the Greek word for wolf with Autolycus, may also evoke *lykios*, an epithet of Apollo, the god of medicine, music and poetry. The encounter is certainly a kind of awakening for the hurrying

Simichidas who slows down to exchange songs with Lycidas. When he gives Simichidas his olive stick at the end we realize that the poem records a poetic initiation: such are the rewards of slowing down, the loafing wayfarer you fall in with may provide you with life-changing insights and gifts.

Virgil takes up the name Lycidas a couple of centuries later in one of his own pastoral poems, the poignant ninth *Eclogue*. Lycidas is here another loafer by the wayside and a pastoral poet. He asks of a passer-by: '"Where are you headed, Moeris? Into town?"' Moeris, a tenant farmer, is herding his new landlord's goats to market, but he is deeply upset because this outsider has just told him that he will have to leave his farm. It seems that there was a dispute in which the poet Menalcas, who may or may not be Virgil, failed to secure their land against the claims of soldiers. As Lycidas walks with Moeris they talk of, and sing snatches from, old songs: '"There was something I heard you singing by yourself | One night when the sky was clear"', remembers Lycidas. '"Age robs us of everything, of our very mind"', replies Moeris; '"Many a time I remember as a boy | Serenading the slow sun down to rest, | But nowadays I'm forgetting song after song"'. Lycidas suggests that they stop before a tomb and sing, but Moeris declines the offer: '"That's enough of that, young fellow. We've a job to do"' (Heaney 2001: 33-4).

When we are consumed by business we forget old songs; as Virgil registers at the end of this eclogue, there is always a tension between the 'divine force' of poetry and worldly cares, mundane haste: in this world the soul is already soiled by that which Lao tzu would have called dust. Moeris, who has begun to sound a bit like a gentle prototype of Macbeth, might have done better to stop and sing for a while in the country before pressing on to town. Sadly we have inherited his unease and largely forgotten, like him, the old songs. Virgil's poem makes

me ask, how can we change our attitude to time? Does time only bear all away, anticipating our exploits? When we slow down, can we discover instead a moment in what was a busy day that renovates all the moments of that day?

When John Milton composed an elegy for a dead university acquaintance, Edward King, he decided to rename him Lycidas. If this poem, called 'Lycidas', is at all a window open in Heaven, then Milton was lamenting at the same time the passing of the loafing hero in the modern age:

> Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more
> Ye Myrtles brown, with Ivy never-sear,
> I com to pluck your Berries harsh and crude,
> And with forc'd fingers rude,
> Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
> Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,
> Compels me to disturb your season due:
> For *Lycidas* is dead, dead ere his prime
> Young *Lycidas*, and hath not left his peer:
> Who would not sing for *Lycidas*? he knew
> Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.
> He must not flote upon his watry bear
> Unwept and welter to the parching wind,
> Without the meed of som melodious tear. (2009: 74-5)

By employing the name Lycidas, Milton is deliberately recalling Theocritus' seventh Idyll and Virgil's ninth Eclogue. He has not chosen this name at random from bucolic or pastoral poetry. This half-divine poet-rustic who can be found suddenly by the wayside emblematizes something our busy urban culture all too often overlooks: 'But O the heavy change, now thou art gon, | Now thou art gon, and never must return!'

Milton laments. 'Lycidas' bewails the death of a particular person. Does the poem also provide us with a modern version of an old-fashioned kind of poetic initiation? If we slow down on occasion, then we just might find Lycidas again, and our encounter with this loafing hero can lead to poetic wisdom; we recover knowledge of man's godlike and quickening powers of imagination. Such encounters often take place within poems if we are slow enough and attentive readers.

It is significant in Milton's elegy that Lycidas has drowned. Edward King had in fact drowned in the Irish Seas in 1637. But Milton would have understood the symbolic significance for King's second or spiritual self, Lycidas: to drown in the sea is to be caught up in this sea of time and space, this material world, the flood that swept away Paradise, which is the true domain of our immortal soul. This spiritual sense of the poem seems at odds with its literal sense. In 'Lycidas', Milton is ostensibly lamenting the death of a friend by drowning. But, if the figure of Lycidas can be thought of as an emblem of man's immortal soul, as well as a poetic name for Edward King, then Milton's poem is also a lamentation for the passing of any soul into generation, our world on earth, which is symbolized by the sea. We are drowned in the sea of time and space, from which King as Lycidas has been saved, ironically, by drowning. In fact, such a reading of the poem, finding its hidden spiritual sense, should provide us with solace. Milton is saying that our birth is a kind of death and our death a kind of birth: a release from this death-like state back into eternity.

The poem itself provides a way for each of us to recognize the immortality of the soul on earth because, as Blake knew, poetry, like painting and music, is one power in man of 'conversing with Paradise which the flood did not Sweep away'. 'Lycidas' provides each reader with the opportunity to recover 'Imaginative vision' because it would speak to us from

eternity. The poem's spiritual significance as an elegy for the immortal soul on earth contains its historical significance as an elegy for a dead friend. Blake would have understood that our conversation with 'Paradise' is the human imagination recognizing that it is itself 'the divine in man', and poems like 'Lycidas' can provide the time and place for such conversation: 'as in a room' we find ourselves readied for the 'intensest rendezvous'.

Milton imagines his poem as if sung by an 'uncouth Swain' idling away a whole day in the countryside:

> And now the Sun had stretch'd out all the hills,
> And now was dropt into the Western bay;
> At last he rose, and twitch'd his Mantle blew:
> To morrow to fresh woods, and Pastures new. (2009: 80)

Wordsworth, reposing underneath a sycamore at the beginning of his poem 'Tintern Abbey', knew very well that he was joining a long line of literary loafers. This book will settle down with some of them to ease into quietly productive conversations about poetry. It also looks to 'fresh woods' and 'Pastures new' and wonders about slowing down and reading poetry in our modern age. Like a loafing figure by the roadside a poem can waylay each of us on the road to business in town, it can take us out of our worldly concerns for a spell, in order to return us to our path, refreshed to notice new things, to deal differently with others in the world.

Blake made his prophetic poem, *Milton*, to correct Milton's errors, by opening his precursor's poems on to a new apprehension of Heaven. It is an attempt to read Milton as I have just interpreted 'Lycidas'. At the climax of *Milton* we are told:

> There is a Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find

> Nor can his Watch Fiends find it, but the Industrious find
> This Moment & it multiply. & when it once is found
> It renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed[.]
> (*Milton*, Plate 35. 42-5)

How do we reconcile indolence with industry? *In-dolentia* is a Latin word, invented by Cicero, meaning freedom from pain; indolence is a state of rest or a love of ease, which is often now derided as mere laziness. Industry, on the other hand, has been understood since the sixteenth century as a virtue comprehending both study and diligence; it requires habitual employment in some useful work, although now it seems more like the vice of capitalism. These two states seem incongruous. Yet Blake's 'Industrious', who find 'a Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find', partake of a special kind of indolence. Such indolence helps us to find the right kind of industry; conversely such industry opens out the day to radiant and productive indolence. Industrious indolence and indolent industry: let us think of these oxymoronic states as the day-dreaming that is the necessary prelude to sustained imaginative work and that patient and joyous labour itself.

Slowness does not preclude work, but finds for us our work; it allows us to become receptive and creative rather than merely busy like Satan and his Watch Fiends, who are a Blakeian version of the demoniac Macbeth and the servants whom he employs as spies. Macbeth's busy kind of industry leads to the 'Industrial Revolution', Blake's indolent kind of industry leads out of that labyrinth to 'Heavens gate, | Built in Jerusalem's wall' (*Jerusalem*, Plate 77). Modern or Macbethian industry puts many employees, in especially poorer countries, in a lot of pain; the industry of the indolent provides potential release from that pain, if we could but take the time to read their work.

For Blake, Satan is selfhood. Industry born of indolence allows us to get over ourselves in order to apprehend that which reason alone cannot comprehend: that 'God and the imagination are one'. Both the truly indolent and the truly industrious gaze at God's windows; each, in its authentic state, is the converse side of the same coin. Anyone's everyday self is very easily distracted and would busily employ itself on its 'way to' what Macbeth calls 'dusty death', the road along which Simichidas rushes, kicking up the pebbles with his dusty boots as he goes. This book invites your everyday self to pause for a moment; it would waylay you, so that you might converse with the vagabond spirit of poetry.

By slowing down to a stop temporarily today, even just to glance at this book, you have already discovered (whether you know it or not) that 'bright eternal Self' (Yeats and Swami 1970: 135), the friend within: you are face to face with Lycidas by the wayside. Such an indolent encounter can make a reader industrious in the right way and such repose is found each day by truly industrious souls who understand the worth of great poetry. Renovation comes to those prepared to read poems slowly. As Wordsworth jotted in a notebook in February 1798, a few months before composing 'Tintern Abbey', 'there is a holy indolence | Compared to which our best activity | Is of times deadly bane' (1979a: 115) and as King Lear's doctor understood, 'Our foster Nurse of Nature, is repose' (IV. iv. 12). If you are willing to embrace the slow and poetic mode of being in the world, then you can reorient an otherwise overly rational, perhaps even baneful or Macbethian, existence. You will also come to a far deeper understanding of the poems themselves.

Slowness does not preclude swiftness: a great virtue of poetry is that it admits the acceleration of intuition. The celerity of poetry is exhilarating. It apprehends more than we

can comprehend even in speeded-up terrestrial time. As Philip Pullman says of fairy tales, travelling fast and light, the greatest poems 'are perfect examples of what you do need and what you don't' (2012: xiv-xv); they burn brightly, in 'a Moment' of eternity, when every word counts. Such supernatural speed is the reward of taking the time to read poems in the middle of today's mundane bustle. Anyone's encounter with Lycidas by the wayside involves a momentary quickening of the heart, a sudden recognition within of something unexpected without, which will change gradually the way in which we live in the world. At the end of everyday time, poetry returns us 'In a moment, in the twinckling of an eye' (1 Corinthians 15. 52) to imaginative consciousness, which will always have outstripped our corruptible business in town.

Where are you off to?

An uncompromising and playful voice by the side of your career asks: 'who are you? Where are you going? Do you think that you are on the right path? What are you doing with your life? When was the last time you stilled your mundane thoughts to understand the way things are? When was the last time you read some soul-stirring poetry?' Bustling common-sense replies: 'what time can I possibly have for that kind of thing when I also have a job and a family and an iPad? I've got too much going on right now. We all had to study some poems at school, but why should I have read anything like that since then? And as for meditating on nothing, is there any time on a Monday morning to become so fully awake?' The voice does not go away.

You may be studying English literature at university, and even there it's very easy not to bother reading Milton, Shakespeare, or indeed any poet at all. Why would you, when

you can deconstruct Thomas Pynchon or fail to understand Michel Foucault? You may teach English literature in a school, and no doubt you could successfully avoid poetry most of the time. If you are a professor of literature, you may pass up poetry altogether, and even if you don't, you may be more interested in historical contexts, psychoanalytic literary criticism or cultural theory than prosody and soul-making. You may be an eminent philosopher or a distinguished scientist, a lawyer or a social worker, an actor or a business man, a politician or a refuse-collector, you may even be an artist, and perhaps you haven't read a poem carefully for years. There are many highly educated professionals out there who no longer have, or never really had, much interest in poems, and many highly intelligent non-professionals too.

Why should we be so largely indifferent to poetry today? Some pundits, like the poet Don Paterson, describe how the Modernists took poetry away from the common man after the First World War. Reacting against sentimental but popular late Romantic English poems, two erudite but supercilious Americans, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, started writing a harder kind of poetry. Careful to use no superfluous words, they nonetheless indulged in making numerous obscure references in their free verse. In many ways, the argument runs, this was a good thing. They helped to purge contemporary poetry of a lot of nostalgic nonsense. They were determined to be accurate about their feelings on paper as they discovered a new urban idiom. But their poems can be still quite unappealing outside of the classroom. If you do not live in an ivory tower, can you really be bothered to spend hours not noticing allusions to texts that you haven't read, in order to half-understand a poem that merely describes the terrible state of the world today? Luckily for Eliot *The Waste Land* appeared just when the study of English literature at university was taking off and it has

been championed by English professors ever since.

Now, according to this argument, a myth has grown outside of academia that poetry is too difficult for the likes of us: if I need comfort or guidance, I'm hardly going to turn to a poem, as my grandmother might have done. Academics, on the other hand, have become so entangled in the intricacies of history and theory, a labyrinth of research, that most of them miss the original function of poetry. But even to offer this explanation of why poetry is now, as Paterson says, a 'marginal art form' (Wroe 2006) is to risk becoming part of the problem.

I take a much slower and larger view. Milton asked his Muse, in the late seventeenth century, over half-way through his biblical epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, 'still govern thou my Song, | *Urania*, and fit audience find, though few' (VII. 30-1). Perhaps certain kinds of poets have only ever expected a small proportion of the population to be their audience. Then again, Milton had just acknowledged that he had 'fall'n on evil dayes' (VII. 25). His days might well have seemed evil since he was at that time in political exile in his own country and he was blind. Yeats and Blake, two poets influenced strongly by Neoplatonic wisdom and extremely well-read in esoteric literature, would have understood that Milton also meant the modern age in general. Since the late seventeenth century, poetry and its fit audience have declined still further.

By 1931, as Yeats well knew, 'all is changed, that high horse riderless, | Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode | Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood' (1950: 276). The swan is man's soul, the darkening flood, the sea of time and space: our life on earth at the moment. The high horse of great poetry, the 'flying Steed' that Milton also rode (see *Paradise Lost*, VII. 12-20), lacks a rider today because we are at the end of an epoch that was already hastening to its finishing-post by the late seventeenth century. At the beginning of that

epoch, in ancient societies, poetry had a more central role. Can it be that, at its end, in our decayed, decadent, materialist culture, a new reality is born, that a new rider can learn to sit in that saddle Homer rode?

Today we are experiencing the winding down of one period in a process of change. I find myself in a late phase, preceding a new one that has already begun, in what the ancients thought of as the 'Great Year', a vast astronomical cycle that contains many historical epochs. Blake restored vivifying knowledge of this way of reckoning time to our modern age in his poem 'The Mental Traveller', which Yeats elaborated with his model of two interlocking gyres in his abstruse treatise *A Vision*. As Raine has pointed out: 'Plato also sees history as a perpetual movement between two poles; sometimes God conducts the universe, and controls its revolutions; at another time He leaves it to its own devices' (2002: 60-1). For a long while now, since before the time of Homer, we have been left to our own devices, during one epoch of the 'Great Year'. The spring that God had wound is now uncoiling itself, and with increasing rapidity in our modern age, performing, as Plato says, 'many myriads of retrograde revolutions'.

We live according to the consequences of such uncoiling. Swearing by capitalism, democracy, reason and science, we are all the while cheerfully ignorant about supernatural powers that hide themselves in great poetry. But we can learn to read the most potent poems that have come down to us so that we trace unexpected insights. New poems and interpretation may change the meaning of the canon, and I would argue that our older poems are to be seen as remade by younger ones, so that they function as divine prompts, like Lycidas by the wayside. If we act on their revealed suggestions then we can learn to wind the spring of the next age ourselves: we begin to awake from our rational and materialist slumber by acknowledging that

God is within the human imagination.

You may not believe in God. Our age no longer takes the supernatural for granted. You may long for faith, but feel reluctant to go to church every Sunday. I contend that the greatest poetry can make us apprehend that God, the centre of religious celebration, whatever we call that nothingness or darkness, incomprehensible and vast in its own being, is a force within man. Such apprehension means that the swan no longer 'drifts upon a darkening flood' but mounts into the sky. Rather than be moved passively along our current, materialist perceptions of the world, along the dusty road to business in town, this book asks of poetry, suddenly and slowly, how each soul might rise to Wordsworth's finely expressed feeling that 'we are greater than we know' (2009: 3. 363).

I have come to recognize that each of us contains vast cycles of history. Our present transition from one phase to another in the 'Great Year' is dependent on the individual discovering a greater self within, on her becoming responsible enough to make our soul. I write this book out of a conviction that poetry is much more powerful and useful than our existing culture admits. Certain poems can help each of us to change together our dark time. In fact, the spring is already being wound but most of us do not know it yet.

All of this sounds terribly strenuous, but the wonderful thing about reading poetry is that it is in essence a pleasurable activity, even before you've learned the basics. I must admit that I enjoy reading poems and this book takes time to enlarge my experience of some of them by sharing my delight, by teaching some of those basics. It may take some time to change the world, but poetry can immediately quicken your powers of intuition, if you can learn to catch it by an instinct, to catch up to its sudden accelerations and transformations.

I'm going to be quoting sometimes-longish passages of

poetry, using their original spelling and punctuation. Please do not be put off. I hope that my book proves how we can allow texts to mean more, by retaining original forms of words, rather than by modernizing them. Original spelling is not, after all, an obstacle to comprehension of my quotations, and at least strange looking words may make you re-read their contexts, even if you know them well. I quote from some of my favourite moments in English literature and they deserve to be read, 'and againe, and againe', as Shakespeare's first editors advised we read his plays (1953: 1. xlix). My quotations are also signposts. All of the poets that I refer to should be given more time than my book can afford them, and if you consult the Bibliography you will be guided to the best editions of their poems.

My method in this book is to practice what Stevens called 'pure explication de texte' (1996: 793). Such careful, scrupulous interpretation of poems is carried out in order to learn from poets how to go about making our soul in the modern world. My main motivation is that poetry matters. It is of central importance to our culture and we endanger ourselves when we forget that. No other art form brings back messages from the silence that is at the heart of our being by using the half-material something that makes us human.

Poetry reaches that which music, painting, sculpture and conceptual art cannot. We may be made out of earth but we are formed by language. You may use words to order a pint or to inquire about a masticating juicer, but poets dispose words, in lines that make you pause at their ends, to help you lose yourself to find that greater self that reposes within.

The book's scope

At the entrance to Purgatory, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the guardian angel inscribed seven *Ps* upon the pilgrim's forehead

with the point of his sword, saying 'See that you wash these wounds, when you are within' (*Purgatorio*, IX. 113-4). The Ps could stand for *Peccatum* (sin), *Plaga* (wound), and *Penitentia* (penitence): the soul now advances to active purgation.

Like Dante the pilgrim I feel that I have undertaken this book with seven *P*s on my forehead. My work moves me, and quite often I am lazily reluctant, towards expiation: it marks me out as among 'the men that sigh, and that cry for all the abominations' (Ezekiel 9. 4).

Since I am such a marked man, you could say that this book begins where Joseph Campbell leaves off, with 'personal despair':

> It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse. And so every one of us shares the supreme ordeal – carries the cross of the redeemer – not in the bright moments of his tribes great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair. (1993: 391)

The poets through the generations have always been ahead of their communities, and they are ahead of ours now. The reader of poetry can be a hero if he slows down and dares to heed that which calls from out of it. That divine power reposing by the wayside who grins 'quietly, broadly, and with a twinkling eye' at our bustling everyday selves can change suddenly and slowly the course of our busy lives. Our guardian spirits reside in poems and they would bring our souls to crisis. Ultimately poets cannot help us in that state of crisis on the road to self-knowledge, as Wordsworth well knew, but they can at least direct us to a point of self-revelation. Self-revelation is divine revelation: when 'We say God and the imagination are one …' That is something I also believe. You may discover for yourself the supernatural correspondence of poems, or you may not, that is your concern. I hope that you still enjoy this book either

way.

Although, as you will see in the first chapter, I may disagree with Wordsworth's obsession with personal memory in *The Prelude*, my concerns in this book are the same as his in that poem – imagination, love and self-knowledge:

> Imagination having been our theme,
> So also hath that intellectual love,
> For they are each in each, and cannot stand
> Dividually. – Here must thou be, O Man!
> Strength to thyself; no Helper has thou here;
> Here keepest thou thy individual state:
> No other can divide with thee this work[.] (*1805 Prelude*, XIII. 185-91)

When we confront this abyss, which is not solipsism, but an apprehension of a greater and at once terrifying and supporting power within, we discover rejuvenated relations in the world. When we are guided towards this divine power, we develop more profound and fructifying relations with our literature. As Wordsworth proclaims: 'joy to him, | O joy to him who here hath sown, hath laid | Here the foundations of his future years' (*1805 Prelude*, XIII. 197-9)!

It was said of my last book that I do 'not hesitate to deal in the spiritual dimensions opened up' (Clarke 2012: back cover) by my chosen poets. Let me hesitate at the opening of this book. I believe that if we are to get on the right path to spiritual understanding, to lay 'the foundations of [our] future years', then we must find or continue with our work in this world. We should not abandon our society. My work is the teaching of English literature. Writing is essential to that activity: as Bacon said, '"reading makes a full man, conversation a ready man, and writing an exact man"'

(Johnson 2000: 269). But getting on the right path allows one to question one's mundane activities. The words of Rumi echo in my head:

> Concentrate upon spirituality as you will – it will shun you if you are unworthy. Write about it, boast of it, comment upon it – it will decline to benefit you; it will flee. But, if it sees your concentration, it may come to your hand, like a trained bird. Like the peacock, it will not sit in an unworthy place. (Shah 1977: 125)

My hope in writing this book is my concentration and yours. I do not mean merely to comment upon spirituality, but to call to it. Like Kierkegaard, I write 'without authority': for me the writing of this book constitutes part of 'my own upbringing and development' (1998: 12).

Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey', which was begun while he was reposing under that 'dark sycamore' on his 1798 tour of the Wye Valley, ends as a kind of meditative prayer, 'for thy sake'. At its climax the poet does not regret the passing of the animal pleasures of his undergraduate days, the period of his life, five years before, when he had first visited the ruins of Tintern Abbey:

> for such loss, I would believe,
> Abundant recompence. For I have learned
> To look on nature not as in the hour
> Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
> The still, sad music of humanity,
> Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
> To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. (2009: 1. 374-5)

I've recently been re-reading a book by Thich Nhat Hanh called *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. It's really a series of letters written by an exiled Vietnamese Buddhist monk to those working in his homeland in the 1970s, offered as means to help them rebuild their country after the war there. The book has been published as a manual on meditation: it offers exercises for taking hold of one's breath to become fully conscious of the moment in which one lives; that 'Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find', 'that Renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed'. Thich Nhat Hanh would say that Wordsworth is mindful that you are in the universe and the universe is in you; measuring his steps along the Wye valley, he comes to compose the above lines with a half smile (see Thich Nhat Hanh 1991: 89-90).

It is very difficult to meditate and to empty one's mind. But it strikes me that reading a poem is one way of learning to take hold of one's breath and to reorganize one's relation to the world. The secular west lacks spiritual discipline and naturally turns to the east for help. But we have our own traditions and mysteries, our own ways of taking hold of breath. If we begin to inhabit the body of English poetry that we have inherited, by reciting poems and remembering them, we find that we have been provided with native exercises sufficient to apprehend that we are greater than we know. We come to apprehend with joy that 'age-long memoried' (Yeats 1980:

272) or 'bright eternal Self' that abides in any great poet's body of work. Raine explains:

> In Eastern civilizations some form of meditation is the norm of spiritual practise. For Blake art was such a practise and the arts are the channels through which visions of these 'eternal things displayed' are embodied and disseminated. 'Prayer is the study of Art. Praise is the practise of Art'. Prayer is receptive, praise active: the one must precede the other. (1991: 6)

In the following chapters we will read together many poems to contemplate 'eternal things displayed'.

These seven essays are each discrete, but also designed to be read in sequence as continuous chapters. We begin in the middle of things with Wordsworth, in order to invoke supernatural presences in poetry in Chapter 2. From Chapter 3 onwards we embark on a chronological journey through the English-speaking generations of poets, from Shakespeare to two of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens. Inevitably, my attention to the pre-eminent British, Irish and American poets of the modern age, involves also a host of earlier poets, including especially Homer, Hesiod, Theocritus, Virgil and Ovid from the classical age, and Dante from the middle ages. As we take this journey together I aim to answer major complaints about poetry that I hear voiced by teenagers, students, strangers in pubs, highly intelligent but ironic friends and relatives, and even professors of English literature. You can think of the seven chapters of this book as offering exercises in slow reading so that life is accelerated by intuition.

Chapter 1

Wordsworth's Survival on Earth

Spots of time

Judging from our current obsessions with history, psychoanalysis and the lives of celebrities, most people today would probably half-agree with Wordsworth that:

> There are in our existence spots of time
> Which with distinct pre-eminence retain
> A fructifying virtue[.] (*1799 Prelude*, I. 288-90)

If we 'fly alongside' Victoria Beckham 'on her journey from lonely teenager', by reading her autobiography, then we learn about those moments that helped her become 'the star she is today' (2002: back cover). For Posh Spice, one significant spot of time was her early exposure to a line from the theme song to the movie *Fame* – 'I'm gonna live forever, I'm gonna learn how to fly' – from which,

> depressed
> By trivial occupations and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse,

family life, tap-dancing lessons, PR,

> [her] mind
> (Especially the imaginative power)
> [Was] nourished, and invisibly repaired.

The line from the song stayed with the young Victoria,

nourishing her fantasies when she was depressed by the trivial occupations of ordinary life and stage school; it caused her vision of fame to fructify into the reality that was Posh Spice because, as Wordsworth understood,

> Such moments chiefly seem to have their date
> In our first childhood. (*1799 Prelude*, I. 290-6)

Nearly everyone now believes that childhood experience is of formative consequence. But why should Wordsworth be so inclusive about his even larger claims that 'spots of time' nourish creativity in adulthood? If my existence has any such pre-eminent spots, or memories, I am not sure how well they have retained a fructifying virtue to nourish my creative imagination today. In any case I do not think that we do well to obsess about them. Formative experience is a treacherous theme for a true poet. I believe that the worst kind of poetry is confessional: in my opinion, Robert Lowell, John Berryman and Sylvia Plath are depressingly limited and dangerously egotistical poets.

It could be argued that *The Prelude*, from which the above lines are taken, preludes the state of literature and our society today since it is a work concerned with the poet's own life. But Wordsworth did not think it appropriate to publish this autobiographical epic poem during his own lifetime (I will go into more detail about Wordsworth writing and revising *The Prelude* from 1798 onwards later in this chapter). He saw it only as the prelude to a greater kind of philosophical poem, which he was ultimately unable to write, and arguably because he sought the sources of his creativity in the wrong direction. By writing *The Prelude* Wordsworth by no means guaranteed his future creativity, he may even have destroyed it and indirectly invented the Spice Girls.

Inspiration does not come from our past. We will not find a

solution to our problems by dwelling on childhood memories or even by simply recalling old books and ancient wisdom. In the words of James Hillman, *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy – And the World's Getting Worse*. We've had over two hundred years of self-reflexive literature and philosophy and we can no longer help ourselves: consumed by self-obsessed poems, fast-ballooning novels, theoretical criticism, historicism and so-called reality television shows, man has lost sight of himself on the earth that he has polluted.

At my rampant worst I would rather go shopping online than know myself, let alone practice losing my everyday self to find that 'bright eternal Self' (Yeats and Swami 1970: 135) that dwells within and without. Closing Google for a spell, to focus on this challenging Word document, I ask, are there spots of time in poetry that have nothing to do with personal memory? How can these moments possibly renew our lives and our world? If such spots seem to come from out of the past, how can we make them of the future? How can poems help us to restore, by integrating, our impoverished inner soul and the largely ignored outer soul of our sick world?

Out damned spot

When I read Wordsworth's expression 'spots of time' I cannot help but think of the most famous 'spot' in English literature, the bloodstain that Lady Macbeth imagines on her hands:

> *Enter Lady, with a Taper*
>
> *Gentlewoman*: Lo you, here she comes: This is her very guise, and upon my life fast asleepe: observe her, stand close.
>
> *Doctor*: How came she by that light?
>
> *Gentlewoman:* Why it stood by her: she ha's light by her continually, 'tis her command.

Doctor: You see her eyes are open.

Gentlewoman: I but their sense are shut.

Doctor: What is it she do's now?

Looke how she rubbes her hands.

Gentlewoman: It is an accustom'd action with her, to seeme thus washing her hands: I have knowne her continue in this a quarter of an houre.

Lady Macbeth: Yet heere's a spot.

Doctor: Heark, she speaks, I will set downe what comes from her, to satisfie my remembrance the more strongly.

Lady Macbeth: Out damned spot: out I say. One: Two: Why then 'tis time to doo't: Hell is murky. (V. i. 22-41)

As well as being a small discolouring mark, a spot is a moral stain, a stigma or disgrace. The doctor is taking dictation from the sleep-walking Lady Macbeth as I imagine a modern day psychotherapist would take notes when talking to a reclining patient who is relating her formative spots of time or memories. We have become Lady Macbeth: most of us are sleep-walking through a dark time; our 'eyes are open' but 'their sense are shut'.

Can therapy but take notes from somnambulists? Of what use is personal, confessional, even therapeutic poetry, itself a form of celebrity autobiography, if we are asleep? What kind of poetry can awaken modern man from the strong satisfactions of memory? The 'Hell' that Lady Macbeth half-sees and dreams is 'murky': it is our world in the twenty-first century. Alarmingly, we might just be fulfilling the prophecies in *Macbeth* today: at the beginning, we see ourselves through the play's glass murkily, by the end, 'face to face' (1 Corinthians 13. 12).

Banquo challenges the witches after they have prophesied Macbeth's future: 'If you can looke into the Seedes of Time, |

And say, which Graine will grow, and which will not, | Speake then to me' (I. iii. 58-60). It would seem that for Wordsworth a spot is a particle like a seed or a drop, and perhaps also a place. Spots of time are seeds of past experience that grow up inside an individual's life to nourish his imagination; they are memory places to which we may have recourse when we are depressed. The major point of Wordsworth's autobiographical poem is that 'Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up | Foster'd alike by beauty and by fear' (*1805 Prelude*, I. 306-7). But should the adult poet eat of the resulting kind of fructifying tree within? Is Wordsworth also saying darkly that there are in our existence blemishes of time? When he coined his expression, 'spots of time', was he thinking consciously or unconsciously of Lady Macbeth's guilty inability to forget her past as well as Banquo's fatal curiosity about his future?

Most of the spots of time that Wordsworth remembers from his own life in *The Prelude* are moments when his younger self felt guilty or scared. It may have been that his submerged intention in writing this autobiographical poem was to purge himself of memory in order to write philosophical poetry. But like many poets today he became consumed by his memories and by nature, revising *The Prelude* intermittently until he died, instead of beginning a new epic poem. A Sufi poet or a Neoplatonist philosopher would have chastised Wordsworth for dwelling so much on his own past. As a self-proclaimed poet-teacher he should have learned to look after, not before.

If we take the larger view of our existence and accept that there is life before and after death, as Wordsworth in fact does in his 'Ode on the Intimations of Immortality in Youth', then our entire world is a spot that defiles the immortal soul. Milton uses the very word spot to describe this earth at the beginning of his 'Mask', the elaborate courtly play first presented at Ludlow Castle in 1634, called *Comus*. 'The first Scene discovers

a wilde Wood' and '*The attendant Spirit descends or enters*'. He describes Heaven where he lives in relation to our filthy earth:

> Before the starry threshold of *Joves* Court
> My mansion is, where those immortal shapes
> Of bright aëreal Spirits live insphear'd
> In Regions milde of calm and serene Ayr,
> Above the smoak and stirr of this dim spot,
> Which men call Earth, and with low-thoughted care
> Confin'd, and pester'd in this pin-fold here,
> Strive to keep up a frail, and Feaverish being
> Unmindfull of the crown that Vertue gives
> After this mortal change, to her true Servants
> Amongst the enthron'd gods on Sainted seats. (*Comus*, 1-11)

That 'Which men call Earth', our smoky and busy world, this guardian spirit calls a 'dim spot'. In fact, he lives on the real surface of the Earth in a 'mansion', or dwelling-place, before Jove's Court. As Socrates points out in Plato's *Phaedo*,

> The earth itself is pure and lies in the pure sky where the stars are situated, which the majority of those who discourse on these subjects call the ether. The water and mist and air are the sediment of the ether and they always flow into the hollows of the earth. We, who dwell in the hollows of it, are unaware of this and we think that we live above, on the surface of the earth. (1997: 93; 109c)

It is very easy during our scientific age, on what we now know to be our round planet, in the wake of modern astronomy and space travel, to scoff at Socrates. But I believe that we betray a larger ignorance by dismissing his view of the earth. The scientific outlook is just a very refined way of living in a

hollow of mist:

> living in a certain hollow of the earth, we believe that we live upon its surface; the air we call the heavens … because of our weakness and slowness we are not able to make our way to the upper limit of the air; if anyone got to this upper limit, if anyone came to it or reached it on wings and his head rose above it, then just as fish on rising from the sea see things in our region, he would see things there and, if his nature could endure to contemplate them, he would know that there is the true heaven, the true light and the true earth, for the earth here, these stones and the whole region, are spoiled and eaten away, just as things in the sea are by the salt water. (1997: 94; 109e-110a)

Where is this 'true heaven', this 'true earth'? Can we reach it merely by propelling our bodies upwards in a space shuttle? Socrates would not have believed in the efficacy of NASA or Richard Branson: we reach the upper limits, the 'true heaven', by other means than jet propulsion. We need another kind of 'wings'. As Lars von Triers sensibly replied on being asked whether we are alone in the universe: '"We are … But no one wants to realize it. They keep wanting to push limits and fly wherever,' he laughs. 'Forget it! Look inward'" (Thorsen 2011).

If we all exist within the mind of God, and we know that mind to be within us, then Socrates' archaic or quaint astronomy begins to make more sense. My syncretic mind races from the beginning of western philosophy to the end of the Bible: 'And I saw a new heaven, and a new earth: for the first heaven, and the first earth were passed away, and there was no more sea' (Revelation 21. 1); no more drifting upon a 'darkening flood' (Yeats 1950: 276). Poetry helps our nature to endure in 'the true light', to contemplate such things as are undiscoverable in space. It helps us to be fish out of our


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will not help him to see that altogether different kind of spot, Satan on the sun.

The word 'spot' becomes more portentous as the poem progresses. From the sun, Satan spots 'new Lands', the earth, which will become spotted in another sense by him. Before the fall, Adam and Eve live in 'spotless innocence' (IV. 318) in Paradise, and Adam reassures Eve after a bad dream (induced by Satan) that:

> Evil into the mind of God or Man
> May come and go, so unapprov'd, and leave
> No spot or blame behind (V. 117-9)

– spot here meaning stigma or moral blemish. Christ's soul is 'unspotted' (V. 248), incapable of being corrupted by the grave or by Satan, which he acknowledges when he pledges to die to redeem man. But our world, 'this Earth' is 'a spot, a graine, | An Atom, with the Firmament compar'd': for Adam 'this opacous Earth', this dull place of mud, is 'this punctual spot' round which the heavenly bodies move, officiating light (VIII. 17-8 and 23).

The prophetic engraver-poet Blake would probably have accepted Wordsworth as the greatest poet of his age; he also understood his limitations as a thinker. With Milton in mind, he might have said that Wordsworth's work is too spotted: too full of unpurged dregs of earth. Such spots are satanic blemishes, although the soul will always remain spotless. Perhaps by dwelling on spots of time we can purge them from our existence, assimilate them to a new one. For Blake, Wordsworth dwells too much on this 'cloudy spot' (*Paradise Lost*, V. 266). Blake complains, 'I see in Wordsworth the Natural Man rising up against the Spiritual Man Continually & then he is No Poet but a Heathen Philosopher at Enmity against all true Poetry or Inspiration'. Wordsworth 'could wish


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