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WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

Recording Angels and Answering Machines

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OURS IS AN AGE dominated by brand names and logos. It's surprising therefore to discover that some of the most famous of these identity signs hark back to the very beginning of the century. On second thoughts, perhaps this isn't so strange—the nineteenth century brought nationalism out from cover, and what is a flag or a national anthem but a working logo. It has been left to our own century (on its last millenial legs, so to speak) to give such code signs an international significance once more. The multinational corporation might be considered the reincarnation of the eighteenth century's universalism, best represented by the frontier-passing style of Italian music. 'Va, pensiero' is still sung at Italian football grounds but we are far from the time when the name Verdi suggested 'Viva Emmanuele, Re d'Italia'. This is the age of Mozart, of Italia in Germania, international casts, Salzburg Americans and discs of Herbert von Karajan on special offer from Kidderminster to Kamchatka. I bring music into this since music is even more metaphorical than literature, and because the most potent signs I know are the celebrated logos owned by the great recording companies. They too date from the beginning of the century, being typical entrepreneurial oddities of a bustling new mechanical age. First there is the Dog and Trumpet, the most idiosyncratic of all, with Nipper the fox-terrier, his head in the gramophone's trumpet, listening to His Master's Voice. Then The Recording Angel, a rather Kensington Gardens putto sitting on a disc and tracing its grooves with a stylus. Finally, there are two large-scale tied semi-quavers, called Magic Notes.

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All these now belong to EMI, but they were rivals at one time, serving The Gramophone Company and the strangely-named Columbia Graphophone Company. I forbear to extend this musical signposting to other recording firms, to Decca, Deutsche Grammophon, Hyperion etc. The ones I have mentioned will suffice for my purpose, which is to help me focus on poetry in what one might describe, violin-like, as its first position.

That is, on the human voice itself. We have come a long way since poetry was the province of the bard, harp-accompanied, relating stories of war and honour. I, for one, admit to being relieved that the poetry I care most about is anchored firmly on the page. Though the paradox of oral poetry's having invented highly elaborate forms apparently *sui generis* has to be faced, I feel confident in believing that the flux of excitement in Donne, Browning and Wallace Stevens owes much to the complication permitted by unimprovisational methods and the mass-printing of the result. Nevertheless, to a greater extent than prose, poetry has not succeeded in purging itself of its shadow cabinet of voices. Much which seems objective is, in an unproveable sense, subjective.

If we concentrate for a moment on Nipper and His Master's Voice, we may approach one of the mysteries of poetry as performance. The dog is responding to a familiar tone, but being a dog he can't know what his master is saying to him unless it is something he has learned to respond to before. Although we, more than Nipper, want to learn new things from the literary voices which speak to us, we cannot do so unless they tell us what we already know and so give us a point of departure for the new. Poetry has always shown a fondness for the aphoristic mode, the parcelling-up of information and feeling in structures easily remembered and shaped by the Pleasure Principle. Where does the authority of literary utterance lie? Or, to put it another way, why are we like Nipper in not fully understanding what is being said while immediately recognizing the annunciating voice? I exaggerate, of course, but do so to stress that shock of recognition precedes enlightment by cognition. Eliot's suggestion that a poem may communicate before it is understood might be extended to proposing that it is never completely understood at all. It only becomes more familiar. Also, paradoxically, the power of the arbitrary—and I am certain that part of the authority of poetry resides in its arbitrariness—is heightened by the way it deflects expectation from the known and wanted pattern. Sonic art where all the coordinates are unfamiliar, however, would not be art but noise. What Nipper listens to are sounds, not noise—you can tell that by his concentration and the poise of his ears. At the beginning of childhood, we learn the meaning of language largely through the attractions of the rhythmic and melodic patterns which words make. I'm not suggesting that

nursery rhymes for instance are just mnemonic devices; many of them were conceived for now-forgotten satirical and political purposes, and survive as attractive sequences. Time alters literary signposts and demotes even sententiousness to the minor duty of reassurance. Only the generalized satire in *Gulliver's Travels* is recognized by most modern readers, and Lilliput has become the domain of children. What is unchanged is the voice of Jonathan Swift. But children, once past the amniotic delights of words as sound patterns, go on to school and learn meanings. They usually start to read poetry some way into their formal teaching, and this means that they either wonder why it isn't straightforward ideas-carrying stuff, or they sanctify it as if it were essentially liturgical or perhaps some species of deep-thinking like philosophy. In fact, what they are hearing are their ancestral voices, not invariably prophesying war. It would be happier for all of us if we could continue to respond to poetry as Nipper did to His Master's Voice. I know I am running the risk of finding whatever I want wherever I look—as indeed Empson did when he categorized even satire as a Version of Pastoral, or Peter Conrad did later, viewing literature across five centuries as preparation for or continuation of Shandyism. But I find that there is a voice inhabiting every poem in some way or other: from the apparently 'given' tone of description or proverbial wisdom (the Voice of God perhaps) to the identifiable voice of the speaker in a Browning monologue.

Before attempting a few light clasifications of the voices which that sharp-eared Listener, Caliban, might have heard on his island wired for sound —familiar reminders stand out, 'recondita armonia' and 'Hearing Secret Harmonies'—I should like to explore my other record logo a little—the Recording Angel, and merge it with the second device in the title of this lecture. When he was anxious to reassure himself and the ghost that he was truly serious about vengeance, Hamlet announced he would wipe from his mind 'all trivial fond records', though he remained the most haunted of analysands throughout the play. When he or any of us tries to find out what the Recording Angel has filed about us, the answer may be a brush-off or an oracular message on which not even the most anxious penitent could act. Everyone here must have winced when the click comes soon after the ringing tone, and our hoped-for interlocutor's voice pronounces 'I am not in at the moment, but if you would leave your name and your message, I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Please speak after the pips.' Such friendly monstrances underlie much poetry as well. From the Bible on to modern American Language Poetry we are frequently in receipt of highly sophisticated signals stored in answering machines. It is one of the responsibilities of poetry to discourage certainty, to act against the generic conveniences of philosophy. How much more attractive than

snatches of The British Grenadiers or achoic arpeggiated chimes are the beautiful evasions of poetry.

I said before that we go to poetry to be told what we know already, but if the vaunted phrase 'Make it New' has any meaning beyond a polemical call-sign, it indicates that the familiar has another dimension, like the far side of the moon. Take, for instance, mankind's oldest habit—that of likening things, the method of metaphor. 'Odd that a thing is most itself when likened', as Richard Wilbur put it. What happens when the search for assurance is answered in poetry? I could give a thousand answers in as many poems, but Wallace Stevens's 'The Motive for Metaphor' is as good as any. The poem goes like this:

> You like it under the trees in Autumn,
> Because everything is half dead.
> The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves
> And repeats words without meaning.
>
> In the same way you were happy in Spring,
> With the half-colours of quarter-things,
> The slightly brighter sky, the melting clouds,
> The single bird, the obscure moon —
> The obscure moon lighting an obscure world
> Of things that would never be quite expressed,
> Where you yourself were never quite yourself
> And did not want nor have to be,
>
> Desiring the exhilaration of changes:
> The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
> The weight of primary noon,
> The A B C of being,
>
> The ruddy temper, the hammer
> Of red and blue, the hard sound —
> Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,
> The vital, arrogant, fatal dominant X.

The things we shrink from are the things we make poetry out of. In another poem, Stevens asks 'How is it that / The rivers shine and hold their mirrors up, / Like excellence collecting excellence'. This collecting of excellence is the Recording Angel's work; it is going on everywhere in nature and occurs in special ways in poetry. The millions of poems the world has so far given rise to are all intimations which the steel of reality is set against. Intimations are made in many different voices, and I shall devote most of my time this afternoon to checking on them, trying to find the locus from which various sorts of being may speak. If we would listen carefully we should be able, as Caliban was, to hear all the island's frequencies, not just the official announcements, the public concerts and the beguiling confessions.

In the play which contains to my mind Shakespeare's most orthodox achievenment in blank verse—the epitome of iambic pentameter—*King Henry the Fifth*, some of the finest poetry is found in the speeches of the Chorus. A Chorus is an old and easily understood device. It is the equivalent of the editorializing voice of the author in a novel or set of essays. Shakespeare used the Chorus to enrich the paucity of his stage scenery, and to cover shifts in time and place. 'Think when we talk of horses that you see them/ Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth' . . . etc. . . . 'Turning the accomplishment of many years into an hourglass' . . . and so on. But is it just that the Chorus insists that ''tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings', or is this out-in-the-open mouthpiece up to something else? Isn't he really giving us a glimpse of what happens all the time in poetry (and in much prose as well)—namely, language pretending that its choice among the available epithets of reality is reality itself, free of the bias of the observer and compiler? I don't want to rush this into absurdity: in practice we experience little difficulty in responding to the Chorus's evocation of the eve of the Battle of Agincourt. Yet we might ask ourselves, 'What is the point of view of the speaker?' I'll quote a part of the opening of Act Four, since I think that lectures usually include all too little poetry and because I relish this richest of blank verse, even if it has to be in my own voice.

> Now entertain conjecture of a time
> When creeping murmur and the poring dark
> Fills the wide vessel of the universe.
> From camp to camp, through the foul womb of night,
> The hum of either army stilly sounds,
> That the fix'd sentinels almost receive
> The secret whispers of each other's watch:
> Fire answers fire, and through their paly flames
> Each battle sees the other's umber'd face:
> Steed answers steed, in high and boastful neighs
> Piercing the night's dull ear; and from the tents
> The armourers, accomplishing the knights,
> With busy hammers closing rivets up,
> Give dreadful note of preparation.
> The country cocks do crow, the clocks do toll,
> And the third hour of drowsy morning name.
> Proud of their numbers, and secure in soul,
> The confident and over-lusty French
> Do the low-rated English play at dice;
> And chide the cripple tardy-gaited night
> Who, like a foul and ugly witch, doth limp
> So tediously away. The poor condemned English,

> Like sacrifices, by their watchful fires
> Sit patiently, and inly ruminate
> The morning's danger, and their gestures sad
> Investing lank-lean cheeks and war-worn coats
> Presenteth them unto the gazing moon
> So many horrid ghosts.

That is half the Chorus's speech. He goes on to praise the king, telling of how cheering the English soldiers find a visit from this paladin, with his liberal eye, universal like the sun, giving them their 'little touch of Harry in the night.' This last almost Monty Python phrase crowns the partisan tone of the second part of the speech, but it's worth wondering what the first section does to our sense of expectation. The partisanship here is not predominently that of English versus French, but of a Cecil B. deMille-type producer expending a lavish poetical budget on a nightpiece whose reality might well put the theatre patrons off. Shakespeare's command of realism misleads us beautifully: in telling the truth to our senses, he lies to our understanding. I wouldn't have it any other way—if you want the truth about war, you must fight in it and discover that any words further than the blankest and most communiqué -like will misrepresent it. Whatever one thinks of Yeats's attack on Wilfrid Owen's war poetry—'all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick'—there is no good reason to believe Owen's own assertion that the poetry is in the pity. He would have written very differently had that been the case. The poetry is in the language. And we are seeing at this moment, sadly, that the language of poetry cannot match computerized technology. High Tech wars drain all poetry from the world; they become video games leaving only charred bodies behind. Even Shakespeare could do nothing with Baghdad and smart bombs. The hard rule is that poetry has to be loyal to language, to Stevens's 'essential gaudiness.' Poetry was one of the consolations offered Adam and his partner after their expulsion from the garden. It was the rainbow of lies over Eden when the natural vision faded. Laertes, looking at mad Ophelia, noted that 'Thought and afflictions, passion, hell itself/ She turns to favour and to prettiness'. At this point I can hear the voice of George Herbert, a poet whose genius might be said to derive from his passion for truth—and then also of Samuel Beckett whose progress was from an almost Yeatsian extravagance (I think Joyce is not to the point here) to the nothingness of his last-breath last works. Yet what all these have in common is a falsification which is built into language, and each knows that beauty alone will justify their efforts—or, if not beauty, at least some sort of pleasure in the shaping of truth beyond its commitment to right behaviour. It is exactly if not precisely the voice inside the words which we believe in, and which gives us the satisfaction we call art. A poem quite as

much as a painting, a piece of sculpture or a musical composition is a made object—its difference from these other artworks lies in the raw material it is made from—language, words and their couplings, mere symbols, not their own creatures. Right from the start poetry has had to put up a fight against meaning which painting and music have hardly been bothered by. In our century we have made this battle the very subject of poetry. It isn't easy to take sides honestly: just as you are about to rejoice in a juicy collection of non sequiturs in one of John Ashbery's poems, the voice of conscience calls you back to the obligations not just of meaning but of emotional congruity. The long poetic career of W. H. Auden reveals a steady tug of conscience away from Edenic arbitrariness to a dour reticence made up of short views and trust in God. But the Old Adam isn't suppressed so easily—witness Auden's habit of fitting up his later verses with a special camp or nonce vocabulary. His lexical sweet tooth remains in danger of becoming carious, to borrow a phrase of Stravinsky's. But he loves to warn us of the dangers of poetical independence which can so readily lead to showing-off and smugness. His poem 'September 1st., 1939' quickly became one of his most popular. Almost equally quickly it earned its author's distrust, especially the stanza which everyone loved to quote, and which Auden excised from the poem as soon as he could.

> All I have is a voice
> To undo the folded lie,
> The romantic lie in the brain
> Of the sensual man-in-the-street
> And the lie of Authority
> Whose buildings grope the sky:
> There is no such thing as the State
> And no one exists alone;
> Hunger allows no choice
> To the citizen or the police;
> We must love one another or die.

Ostensibly it was the last line which so offended the poet. That 'or die' should have been 'and die', he stated. I wonder though whether it wasn't the admission that all he had was a voice which stuck in Auden's throat. It is one of those boastful confessions poets love to make: we want to be contradicted or to be allowed to assert shyly that our voices are more important than Authority's buildings or the duties of citizens and policemen. The suppressor of this stanza is the Auden who found Pacifism dishonest and insisted on taking seriously his democratic duties of voting and doing jury service. But a poet can't turn his voice into that of a divine or a philosopher without surrendering his older oracular powers. The young Auden was certainly oracular—who is this new guy who's got into the

landscape? Wyndham Lewis asked. The older Auden too reverted from time to time to warnings of a more paradoxical sort, as in the coda to his poem 'The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning.'

> For given Man, by birth, by education,
> Imago Dei who forgot his station,
> The self-made creature who himself unmakes,
> The only creature ever made who fakes,
> With no more nature in his loving smile
> Than in his theories of a natural style,
> What but tall tales, the luck of verbal playing,
> Can trick his lying nature into saying
> That love, or truth in any serious sense,
> Like orthodoxy, is a reticence.

So, we are to attain Christian reserve by being playful—perhaps the only time Auden and Wallace Stevens might be thought to be speaking to the same text. I said earlier that the battle between poetry's atavism and literature's responsibility has hotted up this century. Both Modernism (a fairly unclear concept) and Post Modernism (a desperately unclear one) seem to me centred on the problem of meaning—*Voice versus Meaning* is an aesthetic current running through poetry since Robert Browning. It may even be glimpsed in Pope's medium-length essay-poems: compare the prose advertisements which Pope sometimes appends to them. The poetry flows with the brilliance of a sonata-form exposition: it feels utterly convincing, the sound leading the sense by the hand. It is, however, as the advertisement makes plain, a daisy-chain of argument put forward with little logic beyond its rhetoric. I find this the case with the *Moral Essays* and The *Essay on Man*, though not with the very early, perfectly crafted *Essay on Criticism*. In Pope's mature poems it is the Voice of The Master which the dog is devoted to, rather than the Master's message. Such anxiety can produce a kind of poetic paralysis. Perhaps I may justify my quoting two lines of my own poetry, by pleading my envious bafflement when reading modern virtuosi of the opulently oblique.

> Wonderful for those who keep away
> from meaning, living somewhere better –

That 'somewhere better' has always been with us, but only since Robert Browning has it appeared in its secular self-sufficency, not serving a larger cause. So many elaborate contrivances, often wreathed in tendrils of erudition, have been handed down to us by poets whose concern was to promote a theology, a world view or a commanding orthodoxy. I admit the case could be put the other way round: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Orlando Furioso* might appear to serve Christianity in order

that they can indulge in poetry. We have been warned very severely about this—'don't read the Bible for its prose', we're admonished. Attitudes like Neville Cardus's, who said that if he knew that his Redeemer liveth it was because Handel had asserted the fact, seem very outdated and Manchester Liberal. Yet I'm sure many of us wonder when we look at Pontormo's Deposition in Santa Felicità, Florence, or listen to Josquin's setting of Psalm 51 whether their depth of feeling must of necessity spring from dogmatic conviction. It is the service which counts: the reward for that service is a whole society, vocabulary and range of reference from which artistic constructions can be properly made.

The voice of poetry up until the nineteenth century was a Christian voice. It didn't matter too much how seriously the artist believed in his theology; he had no alternative but to employ Christian language and symbols. I don't think we should be nostalgic about this—I mean about some of us having lost such certainty. I deplore the sort of seriousness T. S. Eliot uses to reprimand Shakespeare's lines in *King Lear* 'As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;/ They kill us for their sport.' when set beside Dante's 'la sua voluntade è nostra pace'. To be fair, Eliot does not make his comparison on poetic grounds but on philosophical ones. Even so, I smell a sort of snobbery in his and Pound's elevation of Dante's alliegance to an organic Christendom over Shakespeare's local and proverbial loyalties. In practice, Shakespeare's plays rely on Europe's classical inheritance and on the Bible as much as *The Divine Comedy* does: think of the passage in *The Merchant of Venice* beginning 'When Jacob grazed his uncle Laban's sheep.' One could go on and cite Dante's Florentine spite as being more parochial than anything in Shakespeare. Shakespeare's fault for Eliot is his unwillingness to be prescriptive: he hears too many voices and speaks in too many accents to be trusted.

From the beginning of our verse, English poets have couched their poems in other men's and women's voices, but it is with Robert Browning that the monologue became dramatic and assumed the centre of the poetic arena. His practice tried not only to pack a whole play's dramatis personae into one usurping voice but also to allow that singleton to editorialize as it saw fit. This is to put a gloss on the view of the Browningesque monologue (and since Browning these have sprouted up everywhere) that it should be thought of as a key speech in a play which doesn't exist but which it creates around itself as ectoplasm. In his cruder moments we can see Browning lifting the stage directions up into the text—'put up your torches . . . No more wine, then we'll push back our chairs and talk' . . . and so on. But usually his technique is much subtler: he has led whole generations of poets to experiment by fitting analysis and criticism

marsupially in their poems; Byron's 'Every poet his own Aristotle' almost achieved.

Browning's separation of the key speech from its context implied or immersed is, I believe, the basic technique which many contemporary poets employ. There is fairly general critical agreement that, despite his fondness for archaic diction and 'poetical' word-order, Browning is the father of Anglo-American Modernism. Pound thought so: Eliot kept off the subject, but relied heavily on Browning in poems such as *Prufrock* and *Gerontion*. However, the real revolution wrought by Browning was quieter than the noisy manoeuvrings of Pound. It wrested scope and seriousness from novel, play and biography—even from natural history—and gave it back to poetry. There was something to be done in poetry beyond satisfying the lyrical impulse, the sub-division of a whole landscape into its song lines, a task entrusted to *The Golden Treasury*. When the modern poet sits down to write he has Browning to thank for several circumstances which he probably takes for granted. Firstly, he can use any voice he pleases, and not necessarily have to identify it. Secondly, he can assume that the reader does not think that the world he evokes will be taken for objective reality. Thirdly, he can find his material anywhere, and weave it into his poem and so make it his own. The voice in modern poetry is tantamount to instant baptism: it makes poetical whatever it incorporates. It has no attitude to poetic stock; no preferred diction; and no prescribed ethical or aesthetic duty. Browning changed the coordinates by which poetry is recognized. Out went recitative and aria; in came the style the Germans call 'durchkomponiert', through composed, continuous melody. The chief gain was poetry's escape from a ghetto of appropriateness. The poet ate further down the table from the salt, but he ate more voraciously.

The least cluttered of Browning's monologues are soliloquies on which the reader is a simple eavesdropper. In 'Up at a Villa, down in the City' subtitled 'As distinguished by an Italian Person of Quality', you hear about Italian life but it doesn't matter who you are. 'Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister', on the other hand, seems to be addressed to another and sympathetic colleague, one expected to share the speaker's distaste for Brother Laurence. The reader then becomes the second listener. 'Up at a Villa' is the better poem, but 'Soliloquy' is a more sophisticated structure. Sometimes in a Browning monologue the interlocutor is part of the *mise-en-scène*. Talking to one's own sort, 'One of Us' as you might say, a voice will more readily reveal its nastiness—a method beautifully illustrated in 'My Last Duchess'. The ideal listener might be God, on the other side of his universal confessional—or God being invented as the poem progresses. In 'Caliban Upon Setebos', Caliban wants God to congratulate him on some pretty good detective work. There is another

sub-title, 'Natural Theology on the Island', and Caliban is trapped by the island's lush-growing hypotheses.

In Browning's hands the monologue becomes a Protean device, a path poetry may adopt to open the whole world to its investigations. There is no subject for which the poet cannot establish a relevant voice. From the one voice in charge of revelation come many voices, as Browning diversifies into highly complicated shapes. With his Tarnhelm on, Browning slithers into the various genres: 'Andrea del Sarto' (Vasari versified); 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' (bonsai ballad-opera); 'How It Strikes a Contemporary' (literary criticism); 'A Grammarian's Funeral' (literary theory); and the later 'Parleyings' (self-education as autobiography). One thing which strikes the reader of Browning each time he goes back to the poems is their bookishness. This is another reason for considering him the Father of Us All. Browning's English and Italian characters alike exhibit a convincing small-town worldliness, a conspiratorial scribblers' ambience, a freshly-coined opinionatedness. The world has been metamorphosed into talkative figures obliged to get everything down, and from all points of view. Apotheosis arrives with *The Ring and the Book*, that twelve-part *Rashomon*, suggesting that truth belongs to the garrulous. Browning satisfies the haranguer who is in each of us. We are born, we talk and we die. Chiefly we talk, and when we meet a good talker we listen. The world turns into words. The Recording Angel becomes our Chief Solliloquizer, and the message on the Answering Machine is 'Keep Talking.'

Fashion has changed since Browning's day. So when we look for his influence in poetry written this century we might miss it, thwarted by his Victorian love of inclusiveness, of preferring connections to cryptic omissions. Even here we should note that a poet may be mysterious to the point of eschewing Victorian accountability and yet preserve a Victorian opulence—I am thinking of John Ashbery's extended poem 'Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror'. This is the very model of the modern monologue, though its talking heads are hydra-like. They all sprout from one art-historical, philosophical neck. For all his shining New York stylishness, Ashbery might be called 'Le Browning de nos Jours'. He is as fond of writing about artists as Browning was. In 'Self Portrait', Parmigianino, for me and I guess for Ashbery as well, the most technically accomplished painter who ever lived, is in and out of Ashbery's own distorting mirror. The I of the poem is that modern I (not spelled eye) which we are certainly not to conclude is the poet, but which must include him. The other pronouns are likely to fail an identity parade as well. As the self breaks up in dreams, so in Ashbery's poem the true voice of feeling becomes a feast of ventriloquism. Everything is explained, but then we add another word—*away*. One American critic

has referred to the 'Self Portrait' as a mysterious and beautiful response to Whitman's invitation to American poets to loaf and invite their souls. But Parmigianino is more intellectual and more European than that and Ashbery's poem is too dandified to be Whitmanesque. What the mirror is to Parmigianino, the oil slick of associations is to Ashbery. You cannot get any deeper, you can only go wider. The soul can't accept all its invitations.

> The soul has to stay where it is,
> Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,
> The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind,
> Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay
> Posing in this place. It must move
> As little as possible. This is what the portrait says.
> But there is in that gaze a combination
> Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful
> In its restraint that one cannot look for long.
> The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
> Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
> Has no secret, is small, and it fits
> The hollow perfectly: its room, our moments of attention.
> That is the tune but there are no words.
> The words are only speculation
> (From the Latin *speculum*, mirror):
> They seek but cannot find the meaning of the music.
> We see only postures of the dream,
> Riders of the motion that swings the face
> Into view under evening skies, with no
> False disarray as proof of authenticity.
> But it is life englobed.
> One would like to stick one's hand
> Out of the globe, but its dimension,
> What carries it, will not allow it.

What I called the fight between Voice and Meaning is neatly placed in this passage (one characteristic of Ashbery in seeming self-sufficient but in fact a small part of a long poem). In imagination and in inspiration—in the head or in the dream—you will find what Ashbery calls the tune. But on the page there are only the words. The meaning of the music will never, in any easy sense, be the meaning of the words. Which is why poets go on writing. They are musicians by other means. I have always been suspicious of analogies in the arts—poet as sculptor, frozen music, unacknowledged legislator etc.—but I do find a useful parallel in poetry's and music's use of thematic development. Also, I feel in my bones that music is the 'Ur-Kunst', the one from which all the others spring, despite its apparent late development as Europe's premier art.

The bias in any sort of scale, even in a twelve-note row, is a musical strait-jacket equivalent to the poet's, who has to use symbols (words) invented for purposes more utilitarian than his. Both poet and musician have to put up with the paradox that their opportunities for extravagance are less good in these free-thinking times than they were when every artist had to appear to serve a cause beyond himself. But as Ashbery, Stevens, and a whole range of modern poets show, the need for disguises is as great as ever. Today's inquisitors, however, are the aestheticians and theorists.

It may seem to many who have followed me so far that I have been playing about irresponsibly with serious matters—nothing less than poetry's power to move its readers and listeners, and its duty to promote good and demote evil. Anybody on his feet on an occasion like this should try to imagine what Milton would think of the course of his argument. But that would be Milton the law-giver, moral revolutionary and republican polemicist. Milton the poet is another matter. Though they hold strong views, like any other member of the public, poets do not necessarily keep those views in sight when they sit down to write. They look to criticism to help them follow their own track, to trace the voices in their words. Critics, of course, would rather grade them like eggs. There is no help for this. Another poem of Ashbery's makes it clear that a poet may be aware that his performance sets up difficulties of tone and language. It's titled *Paradoxes and Oxymorons*.

> This poem is concerned with language on a very plain level.
> Look at it talking to you. You look out a window
> Or pretend to fidget. You have it but you don't have it.
> You miss it, it misses you. You miss each other.
>
> The poem is sad because it wants to be yours, and cannot.
> What's a plain level? It is that and other things,
> Bringing a system of them into play. Play?
> Well, actually, yes, but I consider play to be
> A deeper outside thing, a dreamed role-pattern,
> As in the division of grace these long August days
> Without proof. Open-ended. And before you know
> It gets lost in the steam and chatter of typewriters.
>
> It has been played once more. I think you exist only
> To ease me into doing it, on your level, and then you aren't there
> Or have adopted a different attitude. And the poem
> Has set me softly down beside you. The poem is you.

Many people, myself included, find it tiresome that modern poets make 'the poem' the hero of their productions. But then we find ourselves

doing it. The reason is that we have so many voices in our heads and levels of responsibility in our understanding, that we cannot be innocent listeners. The very art we practise has taken over the role of nascent reality. It would be good to see and hear things freshly, and perhaps we can only do that if we recognize all the programmes we've been listening to, whether we wish to recall them or not. As Stevens wrote, 'Tell X that speech is not dirty silence/ Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier.' In Ashbery's quatrains the poem which sits down next to his up-to-date Miss Muffet will certainly frighten her away. To learn about the self is usually frightening. It is hard to imagine any authorial disdain friendlier than Ashbery's. What distinguishes him from many fellow domesticated Surrealists is the authenticity of the material he makes his poems from. They are never the sayings of a man in an isolation ward, though they do insist on being heard in their own voice—that is, as interim statements, messages perhaps intended for bottles. Behind his highly aesthetic surface, the real muddled world of America lurks. But reality is judged as no more real than any other verbal manifestation. If imagination, rather than reality is to be celebrated, then the number of possibilities is limitless, and Ashbery is deliberately inclusive, though not in the Victorina mode. He is unworried by the most hair-raising of non sequiturs. In another poem he reminds us that the artist 'often . . . finds/ He has omitted the thing he started out to say/ In the first place . . .' To the eager anticipator of truth and beauty the answer on the machine is likely to be something completely different. The only thing a poem shouldn't be is less generous than its questioner.

One of the difficulties in talking about contemporary poetry seldom gets aired in serious quarters. It is too close to the bone. Namely, that we are too many, as Yeats observed in *The Cheshire Cheese*. Reference books exist which list more than 2,000 poets living and working in the English-speaking world alone. The usual, perhaps the humane, if not the generous, reaction to this is to narrow the field to a workable canon, and to neglect everything else. After all, Jonathan Swift observed long ago, 'Say, Britain, could you ever boast/Three poets in an age at most'. The combination of intense competition among poets and an absence of any universally agreed style greatly emphasizes the individual voice. Again—and this will be the last time – I'd like to quote from one of my own poems —

> the trouble is the shock,
> too much talent in the world, it can't absorb
> its own creation; there are queues in Heaven
> as the million dreams fight to be born
> and troop before the face of vindication —

It was all very well for Auden to say that originality was the last thing he looked for in poetry—in practice he was not so reactionary. It might even be worth asking whether the craftsmen who carved the face of Chartres Cathedral were as anonymous in their own time as historians sometimes say they were. A lingua franca may help a great artist find his individual voice, not bury him beneath its uniform outlines. The point remains, though, that as the next millenium approaches, we have no way of authenticating new verse beyond the resonance set up in us by its personal accents. Discussion of technique, of historical necessity and of prevailing theory will continue, but the critic will have to be more of a talent-spotter than a quality control inspector.

In attempting to delineate the way voice underlies and subverts meaning in poetry I have found it easier to traverse what one might call the flats and maynes of the twentieth century than to dwell on the larger achievements of the past—other than one foray into Shakspeare and a dip into Browning. (As a momentary aside, it is worth stressing that Shakespeare has the most compellingly individual voice of all, despite his shadowy biography and his indifference to publication. The more cryptic his utterance the more personal his sound. Compare his sonnets with Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*. The difference is between the gamiest Freudian case-history and Amateur Night in the Petrarchan Academy. Shakespeare's poet-hero is the Rat-Man of the High Renaissance.)

I want to end by examining two well-known poems from the past where I believe some enlightenment may come from considering the voice or voices which inhabit them. First, one of Wordsworth's lyrics, 'A Complaint.'

> There is a change and I am poor;
> Your love hath been, nor long ago,
> A Fountain at my fond Heart's door,
> Whose only business was to flow;
> And flow it did; not taking heed
> Of its own bounty, or my need.
> What happy moments did I count!
> Blessed was I then all bliss above!
> Now, for this consecrated Fount
> Of murmuring, sparkling, living love,
> What have I? Shall I dare to tell?
> A comfortless and hidden WELL.
>
> A Well of love—it may be deep —
> I trust it is, and never dry:
> What matter? if the Waters sleep
> In silence and obscurity.

> Such change, and at the very door
> Of my fond Heart, hath made me poor.

Not being a Wordsworth man, I first encountered this poem when a student in Perth Western Australia brought it to me and asked me what it meant. At first, it didn't seem difficult. I was sure that it was not a love poem in the usual sense. Nevertheless, it borrowed from that well-tried convention. I decided it was an affecting example of the love poem directed to a side of life all too little explored in poetry—collegiate loyalty, masculine sodality. Which gave it a pleasant irony if you considered that Browning was to set Wordsworth up as 'The Lost Leader' some years after this was written. But I was too lazy to discover who Wordsworth had in mind. The tone and some of the locutions interested me, however. A sort of selfish grievance pervades the poem. There is no examination of why the fountain played for him in the first place. In this the similarity to an erotic love poem is strong—how dare you take away the bounty I've grown accustomed to. 'Whose only business was to flow' is a bit of cheek, though not taking heed of its own bounty or his need does seem more generous. The final couplet is hard to take if one wants to go on admiring Wordsworth. At no time does he take his mind off his own need. Such a fond heart as his might seem to others a rather greedy one. Lazy as I was, I suppose I knew he was writing about Coleridge. My question now is whether identifying Coleridge as the turned-off fountain makes any significant difference to one's reception of the poem. Beyond this, there is the whole question of the Theophrastian voice in poetry, and how far it underwrites any particular set of circumstances. Thus, if I sit down to compose a poem ostensibly descriptive of someone's inadequacy or felony, will I cunningly put myself in the right by adopting well-tried modes of accusation? Further off lurks the worry about all those pronouns poetry bristles with. The second person pronoun has a long history of evasivensss in the accusatory mouth of the first person pronoun, well before today's slippery lyrics. Yet my initial reaction to Wordsworth's poem was not significantly different from my more measured assessment once I'd read it up. Suspicion was there from the start. Like Nipper with his head in the trumpet, I could recognize something in this voice. Let me call it egotism, and perhaps pompous outrage.

My second poem is by a man who has one of the most distinctive voices in English verse—in fact, I think only Emily Dickinson's among non-dramatic poets is as singular and powerful—that is John Donne. Reading a Donne poem is an immediate test of what we mean by sincerity. Stravinsky's aphorism helps as a start—Sincerity, he wrote, is the *sine qua non* which proves nothing. All artists are sincere and bad

artists are sincerely bad. Therefore plain speaking and baroque elaboration are two kinds of sincerity. Donne's *Holy Sonnets* are especially alarming in that their strident arguing is conducted within the poet's own mind: it is not yet ready to appear dressed up as public rhetoric. The polemicist who was eager to be a bought pen for King James in his battles with the Continental Counter Reformation here turns on himself intemperately. The voice is hysterical, as is the sense of guilt. I find Donne's *idée fixe* of sin a baroque narcotic which limits my taste for these poems. I was able to understand them better once I appreciated that they are not spiritual exercises after ordination but come from the restless period of his life when he was still hoping for court preferment and was fighting a losing battle against the drift, king-propelled, directing him towards a career in the clergy. But, internal as the accusation is, we know it is tooling-up for the senate of world opinion. Those overbearing sermons are just over the horizon. You feel that in a secular age Donne would have been just as tortured—his way to God is through extremity, indeed flamboyance. He has no straight way as Herbert has. Though I don't trust this poetic voice, I can luxuriate in it. Here is No. 13 of Donne's *Holy Sonnets*.

> What if this present were the world's last night?
> Mark in my heart, O Soul, where thou dost dwell,
> The picture of Christ crucified, and tell
> Whether that countenance can thee afright,
> Tears in his eyes quench the amazing light,
> Blood fills his frowns, which from his pierced head fell.
> And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell,
> Which prayed forgiveness of his foes' fierce spite?
> No, no; but as in my idolatry
> I said to all my profane mistresses,
> Beauty, of pity, foulness only is
> A sign of rigour: so I say to thee,
> To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assigned,
> This beauteous form assures a piteous mind.

Is this what Empson called 'argufying' or is it a piece of holy writhing? I am as uncomfortable with Donne's tone as I am when in the presence of Bernini's Saint Teresa. It's funny how the baroque fits music more happily than it does poetry or the architectural arts. The final couplet is a candidate for Auden's excising pencil—surely it is a sort of lie. Would you buy a map of penitence from this man? Yet could anyone with the temerity to imitate Christ so fulsomely adopt a more effective manner of doing it? It was while reading Donne that I first appreciated that meaning is the method and voice is the message. Such an insight may be poor criticism, but it is a useful nudge to composition.

There is, as I have acknowledged all thorugh this lecture, a world

of seriousness which poets must serve which is not responsive to stylistic analysis. This is the harmonious world, the mathematical universe. It is largely deaf to poets' games and contrivances. You get a chilling glimpse of it in Rochester's brief translation of some lines from Lucretius.

> The gods, by right of nature, must possess
> An everlasting age of perfect peace;
> Far off removed from us and our affairs;
> Neither approached by dangers, or by cares;
> Rich in themselves, to whom we cannot add;
> Not pleased by good deeds, nor provoked by bad.

In the meantime, we serve an interventionist world, raising our voices and leaving messages for anyone who'll listen to them. I think again of Auden, parting from Stravinsky one night after much talk and drink; no doubt well past his usual bedtime. 'After all,' he remarked, 'we were put on this earth to make things'; His was the voice of poetry encouraging the voice of music.