

The Poetics of Life – Life as Poetry

It is a great honour to be invited to give this lecture, in a series named in memory of one of the greatest Anglican theologians in the liberal Catholic tradition, convinced that Christian orthodoxy was compatible with the integrity of both the sciences and the humanities.

In this lecture, I shall try to connect poetry with liturgy, as seems appropriate to Charles Gore, who, having been brought up in a low church tradition, was drawn to a more Catholic outlook by the beauty of the liturgy which for him matched the beauty of nature. It is the poetic which brings those two realities together with the questioning character of human existence, as we shall see.

Poetry is not the most popular art. Many people ignore it, preferring narrative, and especially narrative in prose form. Yet a remarkable number of people are drawn to write a poem at some point in their lives. We might wonder why this is. But even so, poetry seems as occasional a matter as it is marginal.

Yet I want to argue that it is neither. That rather, as the philosopher Martin Heidegger put it, in the wake of the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘poetically man dwells’. Human beings are the animal defined by poetry, and our lives are something like a continuous lyric, only interrupted by the more mundane and quotidian, even if today that impinges on us more and more, and brings with it a poetic idiom of its own, perhaps a kind of industrial poetics. The question as to whether that poetics has a liturgical or revelatory dimension is perhaps for another day.

The question of “poetically man dwells” pertains to wonder and astonishment. Other animals may well be amazed, and who knows. But astonishment seems to be the mark of human existentiality. Why is there anything at all? And why are we here as conscious beings to observe it? Both Plato and Aristotle declared that philosophy begins in wonder. So is not philosophy the mark of the human?

Yet philosophy concerns thought, and thought is a kind of more rapid internal motion, which, like all motions, seeks to come to rest. How can thought come to rest, though, except by seeking to think, and ending with something before which it can no longer reflect, but must gaze in permanent surprise and wonder?

If philosophy begins in wonder, it also ends with a more final and mysterious wonder. It is perhaps this wonder which is expressed in poetry, just as it is also expressed and performed in ritual. This observation allows us to bring my topic, and our setting this evening, together, in the national shrine that contains Poets Corner. Poetry, myth, symbolism, religion and religious worship are *not simply prologues to reflective thought, or preambles to it: they are its conclusion, its consummation*. Human life, from childhood to our very ending, passes from naive wonder, via complex discursive reasoning and practice, to a more final and interminable wonder that anticipates the Beatific vision. Thus we pass from lyric initial moment to lyric final moment, and all that is between is in a way incidental: building up to further wonder through a variety of detours, pauses, interruptions and forms of suspense. Nearly everyone catches sight of this now and again, and this is why we might sometimes yearn to write poems. But they are not really a distraction: they are rather the real thing from which our fallen and distracted lives have been diverted.

So how might we live more truly and poetically? This is my question this evening.

When one rises in the morning, one does not usually say to oneself, 'What am I going to say today', not unless one is about to appear on national television to discuss a crisis, or deliver 'Thought for the Day' on the radio.

Rather, one may well ask oneself, 'What am I going to do today?'

We may well think that we are going to perform a series of continuous, if stuttering and punctuated actions, in a single or in varying contexts, but we do not reflect that all these actions will be accompanied or shaped by speech in some manner: whether spoken or written words, or an inner monologue or stream of consciousness or perhaps sung or intoned. Language is so hyper-present that we tend not to notice its shaping of things.

Yet all specifically human action is articulated, symbolic action, in some fashion performed in language or signs of some kind, as well as in gesture or deed. To act is to live – it is to grow, move and engender. It is also to disclose, express or speak, like other animals. But in the case of the human animal, it is to speak with more variety and unpredictability, whether at the individual level, or at the group and ethnic level – this can be the cause of conflict as well as varying cultural miracle, ever since the building of the Tower of Babel.

The post-Babel work of devising diverse cultures is wondrous, and to be celebrated as a better alternative to the false unity, or the false semelfactive uniformity imposed by tyrannically imperial culture. This variety is itself poetic whose diversity is sustained by and suspended from the real one and yet various and transcendent God. This is why the work of great poets such as Dante and Shakespeare, or indeed Tolkien, whose *Lord of the Rings* anniversary we celebrate this year, and who was a poet in both the narrower sense and the broader one of *Dichtung*, or inspired writing, was at once to do with crafting a national sensibility, and yet also looked towards a more universal humanist horizon. All three of these poets reached an enormous international audience, despite their specific work on their national language, mythos and sensibility.

It follows that the post-Babel process of diverse linguistic invention is at once catastrophic and yet redemptive.

For insofar as the human creature is anarchic in her generation of such farraginous (or mixed up) modes of order, we should not say, atheistically, that she has simply been thrown up by a random process of evolution or chance. Rather, we should say that, on the surface of nature, she manifests openly and consciously the very dynamism of life itself: 'nature naturing', or nature in process, rather than 'nature finished' and settled, as in specific plants and animals. For we cannot make any sense of nature in terms of formal logic, which merely polices tautology by refusing negations; nor in terms of legal regularities which belong only to 'nature natured', as the sedimented deposits of fixed habits, the regular operations of secret powers that nonetheless retain an anarchic creative potential. It is in this sense, as thinkers now back in fashion, such as Henri Bergson and A. N. Whitehead realised, that nature herself, beneath the regularities of mechanism, or even the probabilistic regular irregularity of the quantum, is 'life', in the sense of an immanent absolute that brings herself about, gives birth to herself continuously, and yet is wretchedly never satisfied with her offspring: moving from species to species, and within species, from season to season, and bloom to bloom, always resembling, but never quite identical, in such a way that if the wind were to blast a specific rose in our

garden, we are only half-consoled by the arrival of a new bloom the following summer, regretting the dispersal of last year's petals.

Nature as life is therefore already a poem, and has sometimes been the subject of poetic epics, as with Lucretius's (albeit materialist) poem, *De Rerum Natura*. If human beings are poets, then they still speak with the poetic voice of nature, since we are exhaustively natural creatures, even if we are drawn, like all creatures, but discursively and consciously, by the lure of the supernatural. It is for this reason that Augustine and Aquinas spoke of our intellect as a 'higher kind of life'. It is not that our thought is perched on a kind of trellised balcony, peering down on the street-scene of nature beneath us, gathering information and then running it through a process of calculation and computation. It is rather that our thought is a continuation of life, in the mode of awareness, expressing nature fluidly and continuously, more primarily than communicating nature as a series of items one by one, but actually as it were forming a tendril or shoot of life itself. This awareness, as for Ludwig Wittgenstein, is not initially 'private' – it is only possible as a dilation of the forms that we find in matter; in new, abstracted terms that nonetheless must still be rendered symbolically concrete by the imagination, and in language. Every thought must take a detour through, and conclude with a 'turn to the imagination', according to Aquinas, or one might say, every idea requires its 'objective correlative', as T.S. Eliot expressed it.

Therefore, poetry is not a rarefied art practised and enjoyed only by a few, like an elite sideshow at a remove from the fray of life itself, or when true brute life has been set aside for a brief ornamented duration. In fact, if it is a relatively esoteric art, this is because it bears the secret that all language is more fundamentally poetry than it is pragmatic communication. In theory, it would seem, from a rationalist and utilitarian perspective, that we could operate more efficiently without consciousness, like so-called artificial intelligence. Perhaps, thereby, there would be no Babylonian confusion of tongues, gods and cultural norms, and we could all be controlled by a 'globalising' expertise. Yet in that case, why the need for our specific form of riotously confused humanity? Wouldn't we be happier living like sportive dolphins, with no tooling or spinning or troublesome ambivalent inventions that always release a Pandora's box of troubles?

Yet this reflection reveals that in fact the cart should indeed be put before the horse. For it is not that words were invented so that we might better manipulate things, but that things have only appeared to view, in all their diverse aspects and contingent alterations, through the process of human naming, which has therefore always been fundamentally a poetic naming. Initially human beings isolate and identify by virtue of delight – delight at the plenitude of life, that there is life – only as an afterthought becoming aware of the possibility of useful exploitation. It is not that the story of Persephone symbolises the harvest, but that the harvest symbolises the story of Persephone. As archaeological evidence increasingly suggests, cleared spaces of sacrality were initially set aside, temples raised to a new exaltation of the stars and the star-gods, before there were crops grown to be offered in those fields, and civic market-trading and governance emerging in the temple precincts.¹

¹ See Catherine Pickstock, *Aspects of Truth* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2020), 113-140.

So, it would seem that the London-Welsh Catholic poet, David Jones was exorbitantly right.² Gratuity is more fundamental than utility. The Darwinian ‘adaptation’ of things the better to survive is, though true, nonetheless secondary to the contingent reality that certain organic things arise rather than others in the first place, since the modes of survival and adaptation are infinite.

It is for this reason that, even if one is not a politician or broadcaster, one ought to ask oneself, ‘what am I going to say today?’ as much as ‘what am I going to do today?’ For covertly, every single dawn, we are once more in the situation of primitive humanity, or of the toddler beginning to babble. Even though we speak and can only speak through the forms of a given language, and most of our use of that language in the course of any given day will be predetermined, all the same, we cannot quite repress even today the continuing truth that each person has her own idiolect, not just her own unmistakable tone of voice or inflection, but her own idiosyncratic adaptation of the common tongue, or pathway through the words that rush towards her.

For this reason, what we are going to do on any given day is to speak one long continuous poem until nightfall, one long disclosure or self-expression and self-fusion with nature, with artifice, and with other people. It may seem, indeed, that our words will be mainly anchored to, or confined by routine, to the sustaining of regular processes and the prevention of emergencies, but at an ontological level, there is nothing that we have to do. We might not turn up for work, but head for the hills to gather flowers and sing songs of encouragement to hidden spirits, or we might turn up to work in a wholly satirical spirit and play tricks on colleagues for much of the day. Even if we choose not to do so, we might garland our goings in and out with lavish digressions, ironies or recitatives by Michael Finnissy.

Once again, in the wake of many sociologists, there is a reversal here: it is not that the idiolects, detours, poems and songs merely grace or adorn the more basic and mundane discourse: rather, they are the entire point. In a certain way, we only ever go away from home in order to return again, in an endless spiral, just as we only begin any story in order eventually to bring it to a close. In theory we could all gather berries from the hedgerows and survive together in greater peace. But instead, we heave ourselves about, transporting food around the world, and often go to work in order to organise the logistics of this, then go home to eat our imported food. Our economy inscribes circles which we do not need to inhabit, but we do so, for the sake of fascinating and exorbitant intricacy and complexity, in such a way that the complex of utility within which we are entangled is itself a kind of macrocosmic gratuity – a matrix-temple of immanent pleasure and fume, as opposed to the temple bearing sacrifices aloft.

This can sound airy-fairy, yet the point is that the fairies have the first and the last word, as Tolkien knew. It is not just a utilitarian question. Rather, we must ask, who are we as human beings? What is the point of our lives? We must ask poetic questions about our shared human expression and disclosure, our ultimate liturgical carapace, our cosmic poem.

We have seen that nature is most fundamentally self-creating life and that therefore nature, or the wisdom spoken of in the Book of Proverbs as the first daughter of God, is a poet, and her manifold products are living poems. As natural creatures,

² David Jones. ‘Art and Sacrament’ in *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 143-79.

human beings mysteriously display on the surface of nature her underlying poetic character, but in a conscious mode. We sense reality in a five-fold way, and we distil this common sensing as thoughts, which, because we remain embodied as well as spiritual creatures, require the objective correlatives that are words. Language is a kind of restrained music, complexly coded to invoke not just resonating sounds, but also images, scents, tastes and touches. Language is in this respect inherently synaesthetic, as particularly French poets from Charles Baudelaire to Paul Claudel have emphasised. It is also mysteriously onomatopoeic, as Plato argued in his dialogue *Cratylus*. We cannot compare words with the nature of things, because we only know and identify things through words in the broadest sense, whether cried out, or drawn or ritually enacted or sung. For this reason, as for the French Swiss poet, Pierre Chappuis (1930-2020), etymologies are ultimately unfathomable and untraceable.³ We do not know what the first root or inspiration of any verbal expression was, nor even that there was one first original root, as he argues. Rather since primordial times, there was a rhizomatic entanglement of roots, in such a way that the naming of one thing was always an analogical echo of the naming of another. Metaphoric chains therefore have no literal beginnings, and if there is a literal contrast with the metaphoric, then this consists in relative verbal stability, that is related to sufficiently stable natural habits, susceptible of being legalised, and so to nature natured.

It follows that poetry is both the original condition of language, and a coordinating art, since it is at one with the common-sensing that is the root of thought as such. It is for this reason that poetry is ironically the most obscure art and often only appeals to a minority taste. Other arts may be more exorbitantly compelling, spectacular or enthralling. They augment sound or vision, subsuming one, and exalting the objective space in which we live, showing us the secrets and mysteries which surround us. Poetry can be allied to this through epic, mythmaking and drama, song and masque, festival and opera. Yet of its purest nature, it is lyrical expression, and not fictional, except by a necessary artificial diversion or invention that is germane to language as such, being something contrived or conventionally 'made up' by us.

For this reason, poetry cannot fail to tell at least some sort of story that takes off from, and even deliberately conceals (as Chappuis argues), its private occasioning reality.⁴ And yet poetry cleaves closely to reality, grows from and within it. Like music, indeed, it belongs in part to the unconscious thinking of nature; it wells up from unknown sources of which the poet is not fully in control; she is darkly led to a goal that only emerges or rushes towards the poet with the completion of the poem itself. In this regard, however, poetry is not an anomaly or oddity of thought, but is most fundamentally thought, insofar as all our thoughts initially arise as inspirations that 'come rushing to us', perhaps not beyond our probing, but certainly beyond our instrumental control. This is why poetry, as so many poets have insisted, has the task of 'purifying the language of the tribe' (after Poe, Mallarmé and T.S. Eliot) renewing language gone stale, unconcealing its metaphoric and expressive basis overlain by mercantile usage: restoring words as icons or even gods (as in the Orthodox Jesus prayer) rather than cogs or coins or matheses.

³ Pierre Chappuis, 'From *The Proof is in the Void*' in *Like Bits of Wind*, trans. John Taylor (London: Seagull, 2016), 319-62, 321.

⁴ Chappuis, *Like Bits of Wind*, 322.

Nonetheless, poetry is directly situated in the context of real life: it throws us into the storm. It is the very reverse of escapist, because it is always a matter of real apostrophe, address, confrontation with the real. A poem may address a lover, a dryad, a daemon, a muse or a god. Even if it addresses no one in particular, it is a disclosure of the living reality of the poet and seeks its ideal audience – the reader who can resonate with the poet's experience in a kind of shared subjectivity. In this way, as Chappuis again contends, there is a kinship between poetry and love: both involve actions reaching out to another, to a thing or a person, and both involve a reaching out towards appropriate expression itself.⁵

In this way, poetry is ecstasy, but this being 'carried away' does not free the poet from exercising technical judgement; rather, it occasions it. Every poem, because it evokes the very core of language, effaces itself before the things of which it speaks, and yet, at the same time, it substitutes its seductive words for those things, expanding or dilating those things newly. It also, and most drastically, substitutes the poetic spoken 'I', for the real, living I, and the poetically-invoked 'you' for the real living you.

So, should the poet 'classically' hide the metaphoric word behind the plain thing, or should she advertise or display the word itself, in the manner of the Spanish Baroque poet, Luis de Góngora (1561-1627)? In his poetry, 'conceptism', or the play of words, is taken to such a 'cultic' extreme that when the maritime is figured as the celestial or the terrestrial, the inorganic is figured as the organic, the meteorological as the human, the local as the global and the natural as the artificial, we can no longer discern an anchor in its concatenation of conceits, and it is the words themselves that shine more than any invoked constellations.⁶ The dew is also tears, is also sea-spume, is also pearls, so that even nature naturing fuses with nature natured, like a nymph transformed into a tree by an angry god in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and in keeping with the Baroque tendency to 'freeze the dynamic', as disinterred by José Antonio Maravall, in his *Culture of the Baroque*.⁷ Flowers are equally jewels but the jewels prevail, just as dead and mourning words loom over living things, as Góngora says, the

'course of my metered weeping,
floating urn upon a lyrical river'.⁸

The lovelorn narrator entrusts his bodily remains to 'diamond liquid', suggesting an unreal, idealised tomb, to impossible 'silent waves and lightweight earth' that can exist only in poetry, anticipating the 'symbols' of French Nineteenth Century poetic decadence.⁹ Equally, to say that

'the diaphanous annals of the wind
will preserve the vanishment'

⁵ *Like Bits of Wind*, 322.

⁶ Alberto Manguel, 'Introduction' to Luis de Góngora, *The Solitudes*, trans. Edith Grossman (London: Penguin, 2012), xi-xxi.

⁷ Góngora, *The Solitudes*, 'The Second Solitude', 70-80, p.87; José Antonio Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque*; Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 82-3.

⁸ *The Solitudes*, 'The Second Solitude', 553-5, p. 119.

⁹ *The Solitudes*, 'The Second Solitude', 171, p. 93.

of his thought, is to invoke a contradictory record of the unrecorded, which only these lines themselves can archive in their own reflexivity.¹⁰

In the case of Góngora, there is nonetheless more than an ambivalence: it is after all not so clear that only words triumph. The baroque style often sought not simply to advertise its own mannered artifice, but also to echo mimetically both the onrush and the pauses of natural process, as noted by Chappuis, who regards this attempt with ambivalence, as not sustaining sufficiently the eschatological reserve of a continued gulf between word and thing, in which meaning, or at least a desired meaning, somehow arises in an absence between the preserved integrity of both.¹¹

Góngora perhaps alternated between both separation and fusion of word and thing – fusion being required if meaning is to be offered as more than a promise. Thus in terms of such a fusion through mimetic echo of form, his great unfinished sequence *Soledades* (The Solitudes) reaches back towards things and reality, by focussing a wealth of invoked classical mythology and imagery of a precariously teetering complexity upon imagined scenes of ordinary peasant and fishing/seafaring life, in a kind of naturalised pastoral that appears to suggest that only such poetic cultural complexity can do justice to the ordinary, rooted life of human beings which is the real human poetry, in continuity with the poetry of nature. The ‘greed’ of the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadores of the new world is rebuked, in such a way that could seem to cast an ironic light upon the luxury of Góngora’s own poetic display.¹² Even the private misery of the narrator scorned by his mistress is salvaged and dignified not so much by grandiose poetic lamentation, but by being placed within a cosmic scope:

‘deepest ocean be its urn

and mountains of the world its obelisks,’¹³ he pleads.

If we turn from the Spanish Catholic baroque (Góngora was a rather badly-behaved priest) to the English Anglican baroque, then we discover in George Herbert (the saintly Anglican one) a still more self-referential, philosophical and so ‘metaphysical’ way of writing poetry which tends more securely to rebut the accusation that the baroque is only about show. Indeed, Herbert seems to anticipate the French classical accusation of Pierre Boileau, invoking Longinus, that ‘simple’ figures of speech are more effective and evocative of reality than complex ones.¹⁴ And yet, in Herbert’s two poems ‘Jordan I and II’, he does so only in the most highly ironic and contorted manner. Apparently eschewing, in ‘Jordan I’, ‘fictions and false hair’ as alien to the true lyric (perhaps for the reasons I have already expounded), he appeals, rather like Góngora, to shepherds as ‘honest people’ who do not need the pastoral apparatus of ‘enchanted groves’ and ‘sudden arbours’, ‘nightingale or spring’, any more than a lover needs ‘purling streams’ to ornament his passion.¹⁵ Beyond mere ‘riddles’, he concludes, referring to the hymn we all know,

¹⁰ *The Solitudes*, ‘The Second Solitude’, 142-3, p. 91.

¹¹ *Like Bits of Wind*, 335-6, 341, 349.

¹² *The Solitudes*, ‘The Second Solitude’, 369-73, p. 107.

¹³ *The Solitudes*, ‘The First Solitude’, 403-452, po. 35-6, ‘The Second Solitude’, 161-2, 93.

¹⁴ See John Milbank, ‘Sublimity: the Modern Transcendent,’ in *Transcendence* ed Regina Schwartz (London: Routledge, 2004), 211-234.

¹⁵ George Herbert, ‘Jordan I’ on the web at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org>.

‘Nor let me punish me with loss of rhyme
who plainly say, my God, my King.’

The poem ends with a renunciation of poetry in favour of plain speech, as both more honest and more theological, because the final line fails to rhyme, as it should and as we expect. And yet, of course, Herbert intends us to realise that ‘King’ for ‘God’ is metaphor, as often favoured by Royalists like himself, against plain-speaking Puritan republicans. More subtly still, deliberately to fail to produce a rhyme within a poem remains a poetic device, like a deliberate discord in music, and in this case, it tilts towards things over words only by actually fusing the two, and so the literal with the metaphorical.

A similar effect is achieved at the end of ‘Jordan II’, and in both poems of course, the implication of the title is that we ourselves and history have to cross the at once literal and metaphorical Jordan if we are to reach the heavenly realm. In this second poem, Herbert mocks his own normal baroque practice, of ‘Curling with metaphors a plain intention’, invoking the perhaps central baroque trope of ornament, and even philosophical notion of the recursive ‘fold’.¹⁶ He laughs at himself for imagining that ‘Nothing could seem too rich to clothe the sunne’, and like Góngora again, he links the self-indulgent riot of imagery to commercial excess:

‘Decking the sense, as if it were to sell’.

Herbert notes the way in which the enunciated ‘I’ of speech tends to suppress the enunciating and living subject:

‘As flames do work and winde, when they ascend

So did I weave my self into the sense’.

The risk here would seem to be that art is something the artist hides behind, just as the achieved work, as the proper public goal of art, tends, as for Chappuis, to obliterate the occasion of its genesis, and so to hide the maker from her own intransitive subjectivity – substituting, in the Aristotelian terms often invoked by David Jones, *poiesis* for *praxis* and a dead monument of the self for our living reality.

Thus, the final, italicised couplet of the poem denounces such ‘long pretence’. A significantly other and intruding voice of ‘a friend’ whispers to Herbert:

‘There is in love a sweetness readie penn’d

Copie out only that, and save expense’.

This suggests a direct engagement with his real self of ethical practice, rather than poetic performance, and that the true subject of poetry is, once more to allude to Chappuis, identical with the practice of love and connecting with the human, angelic or divine other. This practice, this living of a life, notably refuses the ‘expense’ at once of commercial dealings, and of metaphorical over-elaboration. But once again, there is a catch, Herbert the artist slyly and formally has the last word over Herbert the preacher, and what is being substantially said on the surface.

To speak of love as a natural ‘sweetness’ that can be copied, is to deploy, with fathomless ‘conceitedness’, a figure of literal mimesis itself as metaphor or proportionate analogy, in such a way that imitating love is compared to transcribing

¹⁶ George Herbert, ‘Jordan 2’ at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org>; Gilles Deleuze. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans Tom Conley (Minnesota MS: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

a document. But why, if all is now to be literal, do we need this trope? The answer is that within this comparison of two pairs, the original of one pair, the ‘sweetness’ of love, is no object that can be readily identified or pinned down, so can only be spoken of indirectly and in terms of other things, after all. Yet once again, the effect of this conceit against conceitedness is (rather as for Góngora, but now with respect to the supernatural and not the natural) to make us feel the metaphorically invoked with as immediate intuition as the literal, fusing the direct and the indirect, the immediate and the mediated, the natural and the artificial, together.

The effect of this, one could argue, is redemptive; it is Christological. In a fallen world, nature can seem lacking in meaning, and on the other hand, our meanings can seem lifeless. The mergings achieved in different idioms by Góngora and Herbert tend to mutate nature into meaning and to resurrect meaning as still a mode of natural life.

In this manner, and through this sort of practice, the poet is not just a creator, but also a judge, and a redeemer, endeavouring both to sustain Christ’s ultimate poietic fusion of life and meaning (especially articulated by John’s gospel, which substitutes symbolic actions and resurrections for more detached parables), and to anticipate the last judgement of the earth. In consequence, the poet has to sustain an oscillating balance between word and thing, word and person, which, as we have seen, tend to obliterate each other. She cannot just let things be things, because real things sing of themselves. And yet their song has been somewhat lost or occluded. Yet neither can she merely raise words to universality, because then she encourages people to take gnostic refuge in art (perhaps like the final work of Geoffrey Hill),¹⁷ as a substitute for natural and social life, of which we might have increasing reasons to despair.

And this is not the only modality of judgment within which the poet must engage. She has also to decide whether to adopt regular conventional forms in the hope that these will discipline her into discovering unexpected resonances of content, or whether, instead, in a looser, more Romantic idiom, to let specific senses reach for specifically appropriate and perhaps novel forms. In the case of modernist practice, she will be doing both at once: looking for the impossible meaning, and its singularly appropriate formal expression, as a drastically creative action that is still severely constrained by the insight that it objectively discovers as much as subjectively shapes reality – which we must credit, if there is any truth to poetry at all.

In all of these idioms, the poet must ceaselessly decide how to punctuate – and poetry is punctuation, according to T.S. Eliot.¹⁸ Where to punctuate in the narrow sense, and where to place line-breaks, where to insert parentheses which allow polyphony, and, as Chappuis suggests, a kind of perforation that allows a greater play for unconscious intrusion.¹⁹ The latter is vital because the paradox is that it is only the dimension of the working of unconscious natural life that ensures the surfacing of human originality, beyond the machinic, at the level of language, where it can be consciously appreciated, though not fathomed.

All of this is a question of dialectic, in Plato’s sense: at once of appropriate combining and appropriate spacing; which essential and universal attributes to combine with which constant subject (including those of the speaker and the first-

¹⁷ Geoffrey Hill, *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* (London: Academic, 2019).

¹⁸ Eliot to Montgomery Belgion, 19th July 1940 in ‘In Eliot’s own words: The Waste Land’, at <http://tseliot.com>editorials>.

¹⁹ *Like Bits of Wind*, 330-2, 355.

person voice), and which underlying thing or substance? When to pass from one subject to another, from one stanza to another.

And for all of this, there are conventions and examples, but no ultimate rule. Once more, poetry, the radical level of human language, and of the symbolic action of each one of us, is nature naturing, nature in process, become consciously responsible, in a manner that should cause us fearfully to tremble. We can understand the intervals and distinctions between natural things as both the interim conclusions and the judgements of nature – the lily as much as the porcupine, the beetle as much as the beech tree. The same is true of the attributes of each thing, the shadings and shade of the oak tree, the grey-green melancholy of the ash and the endlessly varying way in which each natural thing generates and organises these universal properties. Here also we see temporary conclusions and summary verdicts on all that has been so far, as well as anticipations of all that is still to come.

Poetry sustains this self-judgement that is life, as much as it sustains the self-creativity that is life. It has to try to help finish broken humanity, just as broken humanity is charged both to finish and repair broken nature. Ultimately, this means that life must be restored in its innate deathlessness, and all things be redeemed. Nature naturing will only cease to be a discontented mother when her continuous bearing is sustained by, and realised in nature nutured, which implies the resurrection of each and every thing.

The poetic life that is human life both envisages this eschaton and helps theurgically to advance it. Reverting to the anarchic level of the natural unconscious, it is able to produce all sorts of novel combinations and spacings, in violation of normal usage. Above all, the positions of fixed but unknown subject, and of known but fluidly applied predicate become unstable within the most radical exercise of poetic art – disturbing our normal sensorium, in the manner invoked by Arthur Rimbaud.

In this way, matter and form may chiasmically change places, in such a way that while, normally, it is the determination of form that gives substance or definition to matter, it can also be matter, as the fluidity of nature, which realises form more deeply as the existential specificity of act, just as for Aquinas, beyond Aristotle, it is being that can actuate form and not simply form that actuates matter. This is equivalent to the contribution of the living unconscious in art, which is what lends to a true work of art its ineffable specificity that is at one with its further generative power of interpretation – just as we have never got to the bottom of the *Iliad* or *King Lear*.

In a poetic purview, creation and judgement are constant predication, the separation of subjects and then their linking – just as all that we say in a single day is a continuous poem; many modernist poets have problematised where one poem ends and another begins. For Christians, this is to conjoin poiesis with praxis, and art with ethical love, even though the detour via art remains necessary, as Tolkien suggests in his novella, *Leaf by Niggle*.²⁰ In an unfallen world, life and meaning, nature and artifice were one, but in a fallen world that requires repair, thing and word, nature and artifice, meaningless life and meaningful death (that is always lament and mourning) have ceaselessly to compensate for one another, as we move endlessly from art to ethics (or ‘politics’) in order to be ethical at all and to attain to art in a not merely decadent manner.

²⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *Leaf by Niggle* (London: Harper Collins, 2016).

In the end, poetry realizes this fusion, the indirect art that also has to be direct love, as Herbert says. Its judgements are always trying to combine nature as subject with artifice as predicate, as baroque poetic practice tends to bring out. Where neither nature nor culture are ultimate and self-sustaining, neither living thing nor memorial word, then we tend to realise that we can still only await and intimate, even if we already advance and anticipate, the divine judgement. For now, we can see that, since creatures only participate in Being, they only receive being in terms of their contingency, their 'might not have been'. But we can also spell out this participation as 'this existence which has a certain set of predicates, might have possessed a different set of predicates' – a rose might have been as a red rather than a white rose, for example. In other words, the mark of our finitude which is, according to Aquinas, the non-coincidence of Being and essence, is also the constitution of each thing in terms of subject and predicate – the existential 'is' being indissociable from the 'is' of predication.

But we have noted the predilection of poetry to reverse these terms, in a way that has kinship with the less substance-dominated character of Chinese philosophy and poetic practice. When unconscious material life or nature becomes equal to rational form, its subject to the latter's predicate, then, as we have seen, we have paradoxically, the most irreducible manifestation of spirit. All this suggests, philosophically, that neither nature nor mind can be ultimate, that neither idealism nor materialism is ultimately true. We cannot reduce reality to the blind life of nature in process, nor to the ceaseless death of specific individual natural beings who all eventually die, nor to the appearances of things to us and our sad attempt to elevate their emptiness as mere words. We cannot, in other words, suppress altogether the blind subjectivity of nature, and substitute for this the conscious rational subjectivity of human mind, else, ironically, this will be reduced to the machinic operation of artificial intelligence.

It seems to follow that the ultimate metaphysical resolutions are also theological. If thought is language, and language is poetry, then nature is levelled with spirit, the 'empty' existential subject with the essential predicate, without the latter (like a rebellious Son) displacing the royal place of the former, to act as a quasi-subject. Instead, the ultimate subject remains always dark, and in one sense it is matter that stands for the fluid givenness and primacy of being, and even for the integrity of the always embodied human person. So here we can realise that, just as our participation in Being implies the separation of subject and predicate, so their coincidence in Being itself, or in God, implies their perfect relational equality which we can take to be a perfect poetry. This coincidence cannot be the simple obliteration of either, because anything that exists also shows itself, and the shown means nothing we can make sense of unless this showing appears in some way.

In this manner, we can conclude that the existence of everything as poetic life, which was opened to view by the Incarnation of the Word, as miraculous and resurrecting life on earth, also tends, and tends rationally and inevitably, to reveal God as absolute poetic life, and therefore as triune.

The Father is not a lone, all-surveying intelligence, but rather the eternal and instantaneous emergence from the unconscious depths of eminently material nature into artistic expression in the Son. Thereby, the grammatical predicate is raised into absolute relational equality with the grammatical subject (as likewise art in relation to nature) in a reversal, as suggested by the Cambridge philosopher, Margaret Masterman. Yet this Son as equalised predicate does not substitute for the Father as

a new lone subject (this sort of rebellion being as much the essence of evil as the idea of a tyrannical lone Father, as diagnosed by Schelling and Franz von Baader), but rather continuously draws from the wells of his mysterious prompting, in such a way that his complete art is still only a sign of the Father, subject to infinite interpretation by the Holy Spirit.

In this way, we can suggest a seamless vision of a metaphysical poetics of life as also a Christological and Trinitarian theology.

But this theology is more primarily lived than thought. If God himself is surprised by the completed 'art' of the Son, as the work of the Spirit, just as God was 'surprised' by the goodness of the completed Creation in Genesis, then we participate in the divine poem by moving from initial to final wonder, as suggested in my introduction. It is not that we become more mature through analytic reflection upon reality, and upon our individual lives. It is rather that we pass through this always-needed analysis towards a 'second naivety' that is the real certainty of faith before the concrete wonders disclosed by revelation; by the incarnation, the coming of the spirit and the repetition of the sacraments. Poetry articulates our final astonishment before nature and life; the poetry of the liturgy both articulates and enacts our final astonishment at the beginning of our final redemption. The beatific vision and the edifice of the new Jerusalem, which this building anticipates, will not be a final explanation or a plate-glass citadel of transparency. Rather, both will be ultimate wonders of art, and of poetry, inexhaustibly to be wondered at and praised in song.