DISPLACED BELIEF:
THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS TEXTUAL CONVENTIONS IN THE PRACTICES OF PRODUCTION AND INTERPRETATION OF MEANING IN ENGLISH LITERARY TEXTS.

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In the beginning, people communicate with each other making verbal noise, which becomes talking to each other. Conversation is the first genre of language. In this early culture there is no writing and the knowledge gained through experience can become the accumulated wisdom of tradition only if it is can be transmitted in speech. For this transmission to be reasonably successful, such speech should be memorable, reducing the casual variety of language features characteristic of conversation. And this second genre of memorable speech is poetry, or at least verse or proverbial aphorisms. Orally composed poetry, with its memorable repetitions of sound and meaning - such as rhythmic and phonemic patterns, repeated epithets and formulae, repeated thematic concerns and motifs[1] - served then a culturally central function. Its subject-matter or field was constituted by those meanings regarded as most significant or profound by the group, or those with most power in the group. The label 'religious' is not inappropriate, though we may label later surviving written texts as separate or sub-genres. Thus in the threnody or epic, in lament or praise concerning the deeds of 'great men', one can recognise the impulse to turn men into verbal gods, to confer spoken immortality through the transmitted fame of heroic deeds. The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* makes this desire explicit.[2] Early written laws (for example, again in Anglo-Saxon)[3] sometimes preserve 'poetic' features of language from their oral origins, for the very notion of secular 'legal' authority emerges from an understanding of divine law. And so on. Again, some of the heightened features of conversation which we might label 'poetic' will be incorporated into the conventions of classical rhetoric and contribute to the evolution of formal prose.[4] Prose is a genre which emerges in the social context of a literate or written culture and so is historically a much later development than poetry. The simple dichotomy of poetry and prose is of course a fiction - in this century the genre of the prose poem is well established, the poem that looks like prose. On the other hand, in the eleventh century Anglo-Saxon homily, we find poetic prose - language without the continuous regularity of the

contemporary poetry, but with similar poetic features of rhythmic patterning and insistent alliteration.

There are now many other possible functions of poetry than that of being memorable,[5] but I think it is helpful to remind ourselves of this origin: that the mode of language of poetry, its characteristic ordering of language heard or seen beyond the necessities of casual speech, originates as associated with a field of religious subject-matter. Words like 'mode' and 'field' are from a linguist's vocabulary for talking about language.[6] A non-linguist - in 6000 BC or now - is less likely to be so analytical, and it is unsurprising that the cultural significance attached to the subject-matter of religion is readily transferred to the genre of poetry itself. Poetry is then important and profound use of language. Thus from the desire to perpetuate the subject-matter of poetry emerges the conviction that poetry of its generic nature transmits more universal truths, has more generality, than the particular here and now reference of casual speech. The importance and generality of the message having been transferred to the speech, it is not surprising that the speaker too has an important status conferred upon them (I use them as singular ungendered pronoun). The poet may be a visionary and see now what others cannot see, or a prophet who looks into the future, or the custodian of the past in the re-telling of old stories, or the means of linking the present to the past and future in the poetic celebration of current events. In short, the poet - or bard or Anglo-Saxon *scop* - is one whose talents take them beyond the usual limits of time and space. How relevant is any of this to what we might say about later poetry?

The distinction is sometimes made between what poets say about poets and poetry and what critics and reviewers say. This is another uneasy dichotomy but considering it can help us interrogate our own practices. David Hopkins, as editor of an anthology entitled *Poets on Poets: Poetic Responses to English Poetry from Chaucer to Yates*, writes, 'Those who have been brought up on the writings of modern literary critics are likely to find a number of features of the poets' responses to their art strange and offputting.'[7] Moreover, Hopkins considers this to be not just an historically contingent estrangement. He continues, '(Modern readers)... are likely to be struck by the extent to which these off-putting features are common to the writings of poets of widely different temperaments, backgrounds, and historical periods.' I read Hopkins' book after submitting the abstract for this paper, but much of the material of his introduction is so relevant to my

general topic that I will briefly summarise the most pertinent points, interspersed with my own commentary.

First, says Hopkins,

> poets' reflections on poetry differ most obviously from those of modern critics in that they are predominantly general and predominantly enthusiastic... Poets, characteristically, write in a tone of excited reverence... and are far more often concerned to celebrate their art in a general way, or to capture in words the 'animating spirit', 'informing soul' or 'characteristic genius' which pervades the total *oeuvre* of one of their peers, than they are to debate particular critical problems, or to discuss particular passages in detail.

Modern critics, on the other hand, tend to make claims to analytical objectivity, as in accumulating detailed evidence to support 'clear lines of argument', and in seeking 'a technical clarity in vocabulary'.

Secondly, whereas textbooks on literature stress distinct periods of English poetry, whether with traditional labels like Augustan, or in terms of more recent emphases on social, political and so on events, 'the stress of the poets themselves, in contrast, is on the continuity of the arts of poetry across period boundaries, and on the power of poetic writing to speak beyond the time and place in which it was originally composed.' Modern critics may regard these views as a 'dangerous mystification' and claim that 'the critic's proper purpose is precisely to resist, subvert and undermine the poems' avowed intentions, and their claim to present 'truth'.' (This is certainly the position of Marxist criticism, or of post-structuralist literary criticism influenced by the philosophical and social theory of writers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.)

I think one can already see a correlation between Hopkins' generalisations and my opening remarks on the origin of poetry. (I need scarcely point out the melding of religious and literary discourse in words such as 'reverence', 'spirit', 'soul'.) The poets whose writings are quoted by Hopkins are all literate poets writing for a literate reader - even if, like Chaucer, before the advent of printing - yet the attitudes expressed by them are for the most part compatible with the view of poetry in an oral culture. First, they seek the wholeness of the speaker beyond the speech, eliding the factual presence of a written text only - that elision of writing of which Derrida will later complain. Secondly, they place that poet in a genealogy of poets who co-exist in the imagination, an ahistorical presence of poets and poetry. Thus, in this representation of the genre, despite commonsense and everyday experience of decay poetry partakes of the immortal, because in that genre the meaning of language persists, can be understood as universal

and general. From that perspective, whatever the field of its subject-matter, poetry can be described as a 'religious' genre. Perhaps I should rephrase that as 'an aesthetic genre which has the potential to become a religious one'. This is in the light of Karen Armstrong's remark, made in her Thursday plenary for this conference, that while the aesthetic experience may provide the moment of revelation, the religious experience should return one also to practical compassion.

On the other hand, those modern critics who prize the analytic and rational, as Hopkins represents them, occupy classic Cartesian positions. And Cartesian positions in literary theory, culminating in the influence of Saussure in so-called structuralist approaches, exemplify *par excellence* the literate subjectivity. They exemplify especially its development after printing, that position of interpretation which, able to review and revise, re-read in private, marginally annotate, make lists, order those lists in taxonomies and so on and so on, brings to the interpretation of poetry habits of consciousness far divorced from its oral origins, those origins which gave the poetic genre its status, profundity and universality.

I don't want to dwell on post-structuralist literary theory except to remark that, paradoxically, those theories which decentre any objective understanding of interpretation give back to us, the readers, the right to read as important what is important to us. If I wish to read poetry for universal and profound truths, then while a critic can tell me my interpretation is not universally true for all readers, no-one can deny that it is true for me. And equally my own reading may change over time, in the context of more experience, including the experience of reading literary critics or the experience of religious conversion. Or whatever. Perhaps in this context I may quote Wordsworth, from his 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface', '... men who read from religious or moral inclinations... come prepared to impart so much passion to the Poet's language, that they remain unconscious how little, in fact, they receive from it.' Wordsworth, while he denies the death of the author, has considerably predated Roland Barthes' pronouncement on the birth of the reader![8]

Now this simple opposition of oral poet and literate critic rings rather *too* simple. In particular it would ring false for those critics who have focused on twentieth century poetry, poets and critics. Thus Edward Larrissy in *Reading Twentieth Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects*, begins his book with the words, 'Accurate description has become the touchstone of value for contemporary critics and reviewers of British and Irish poetry, indeed for many poets and readers.'[9] Larrissy gives many

examples of such empiricism, of the 'reign of the thing', the particular, concrete and objective, and the avoidance of 'emotive language'. This kind of poetic voice has more in common with the rational voice of the literate critic, earlier described. At the same time, good writing is now that which is closest to the particular, to individual sense-experience, rather than that which perpetuates the universal, the communally shared experience. Avoidance of emotive language was seen as a reaction against the Romantics and yet it is with the Romantics that we can identify the unmistakable emergence of the literate poetic voice, the poet isolated and writing of individual experience. Larrissy recognises this when he writes, 'the alienation of contemporary society has exacerbated the old Romantic problem of how (or whether) to infuse a world of fascinating but chaotic sense-data with transcendent meaning when one is deprived of agreed myths.'[10] But for the most part, I suggest, this deprivation has been illusory, for the myths of universality are now re-interpreted for a literate epistemology, a literate way of knowing. Late eighteenth century and nineteenth century science leaps ahead, organising sense-data with general laws of non-transcendent meaning. And poetry of the same period unifies the chaotic sense-data in the persona of the senser. Thus the traditional roles in the divine myth can be reassigned in the human world, the poet as Creator, the poem as his (usually his) Creation. But the unified senser is another facet of that unified thinking Cartesian subject common to early science. Thus Shelley can write: 'Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred.'[11] The religious universal has been written back into the secular in terms not of the field, the object described, but in terms of the subject, the knowing and self-conscious describer. Even with such extreme empiricism as that of, say, the American poet William Carlos Williams, with his famous *dictum*, 'no ideas but in things',[12] the unity of the accidents of particular experience is underwritten by the unity of the poetic persona experiencing them.

To what extent does so-called post-modernism[13] deprive us of the myth of the unified poetic subject? The work and influence of the American John Ashbery is central here. Ashbery's poems will not co-operate with a reader trying to construct a unified experience or sequence of experiences. As David Perkins comments, '(Ashbery) dwells on the impossibility of credibly imagining any reality.'[14] T.S. Eliot had used the language of different social voices in *The Wasteland*, but Ashbery and others who could be called 'post-modernists', like the Australian poet John Forbes, juxtaposed

the language of different registers - the newspaper, television program, telephone conversation, style of poetic 'schools' and so on and so on - in texts for which the unifying meaning seemed to be that there was no unifying meaning. But the persistent reader of poetry is resilient, and the persistent message of poetry has been of its persistence, so that, especially in the context of post-structuralist philosophical writings and of an aesthetic palate trained on video clips and ten second television grabs, the inchoate can be normalised, become comprehensible, paradoxically, as the general explanation for the experience of contemporary life. This is not to treat the language of the post-modernist poem as somehow symbolic of contemporary life - a familiar Modernist literary convention, according to David Perkins. Rather the poem - like the television news and the video clip - *is* part of contemporary life, a world created as much through language, its discourse varieties, its use in information networks and public media, and so on, as through any material objects. These remarks apply to more than language of course; they apply to all the sensible means of semiosis through which our culture represents itself (for example, to name just a few aesthetic modes featured at this conference, we have art, music, the movement of the body). Thus the discursive practices developed in poetry to express universality, when invoked, now do not represent but create - however fleetingly - an object in which otherwise disparate elements may be brought together. (One speaker at this conference has reminded us that the etymology of 'religion', the Latin *re ligare*, means 'to bind or link together'.)

In the brief time remaining I want to give a hasty overview of the reading practices associated with poetry which facilitate this reading of universality and profundity. The first point is that these are not necessarily 'in the text', linguistic features one can point to. Certain reading practices are associated with the genre, but an individual reader may not be familiar with them. Or the reader may be resistant, such as a female reader refusing to identify with what she reads as a patriarchal point of view. Again certain reading practices are historically contingent. So there are various motivations for a reader to read symbolically, extending the interpretation of the text beyond the literal meaning of words and grammar. In caveat, I should immediately acknowledge that modern scholarship has deconstructed the old dichotomy of literal and symbolic. The 'literal' meaning of a word is not absolute, but dependent on the context, verbal and situational; it is the most likely meaning, what is usually recorded by lexicographers from their inspection of contexts. As Umberto Eco says,

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'when we say the rose is a flower we really mean 'the rose is a flower but ...' - that is, but maybe it isn't in this particular context'.[15]

What then are the possible motivations for a reader deciding to read symbolically, that is, to read in this instance, 'the rose is not a flower but something else'? In summary, these are (at least) the reader's recognition of metaphor, symbol and genre. Symbol can be subdivided into that associated with a public code and that derived from the psychoanalytic unconscious. Motivation by genre can be related to the recognition of literal waste, of paradox and of graphic display. I'll briefly gloss or exemplify each of these terms.

Metaphor: The linguistic equation of that which is not usually experienced as identical in the same situation of time and place. For example, in Alfred Noyes' 'The moon was a ghostly galleon', the grammar equates our experience of the sky and our experience of the sea. The two experiences must be overlapped, reading one as symbolic, not present. In this example, 'the galleon is usually a ship but here it isn't'.

Public code: Socially shared codes of symbolic readings, such as those of medieval religious exegesis, of Augustan use of classical mythology, or contemporary overcoding (Eco's term) such as Western black for funerals.

Psychoanalytic unconscious: Each individual brings the associations of their own personal history; to that extent the symbolic readings or associations which a particular text can invoke in a particular person are various. At the same time, those sharing a socially similar habitus, in gender, sexual orientation, education, religion and so on are more likely to interpret in similar ways, so that this private symbolism shades into the public symbolism of the public code.

Metaphor and symbol we can interpret in many uses of language - advertising, jokes, religious and literary prose and so on. The genre of poetry, with its history of 'more profound meaning', provides us with further motivations to read symbolically.

Literal waste: 'Is that all it means?' - the reader finds the obvious meaning is too trivial, especially for an 'important' genre like poetry. Writers are sometimes annoyed with critics for succumbing too readily to this motivation (for example, Judith Wright objected to the teaching of *Bullocky* which she wrote about 'a nice old man' and 'now it has been taken as representative of the whole invasion of Australia'.)[16]

Paradox: The text offers contradictory propositions. In everyday situations we'd assume the speaker was confused. Poetry, like other literary

or religious genres associated with 'depth' of meaning, gives licence to deconstruct the dichotomy at a more general level of meaning.

Graphic Display: Contemporary poets, highly literate in their subjectivity, frequently make use of the look of the poem to the eye, just as traditional poetry made use of the sound of the poem to the ear. For example, the word 'I' may appear on a line alone, which we may readily read as symbolising isolation or alienation.

To facilitate the symbolic mode of reading - that voyage initiated by any of the above means, in which the reader, whether licensed by the intentions of the writer or not, cuts loose from the constraints of everyday language bound in a particular situation of time and place - the poetic genre has become associated with another conventional practice of reading. This is the suspension of the usual interpretation of deixis in language. Deixis is from the Greek for 'pointing'. It refers to those words in the language which point to or away from the speaker in a situation - like here/there, come/go, this/that, now/then, my/your - and also to those words which point to the situation itself - the/a, where *the* means 'specific in the situation', *a* 'not specific in the situation'. Because, reading symbolically, we are embarked on that sea of semiosis which the Western church fathers feared in uncharted voyages across the 'profundity of the scriptures',[17] we will use our interpretation of deixis only when it is helpful to moor us, albeit a temporary anchor, to the understanding we find meaningful as a symbolic interpretation.

A final comment: the symbolic mode of reading, however invoked, takes us on a similar journey. But the nature of the invocations differs. In general you could say that, whereas metaphor and paradox are produced by the writer 'in' the language of the text, symbol and literal waste are not. The reader recognises symbol and literal waste for extra-linguistic reasons. The writer has possibly intended them in the text - in the case of their motivation through the unconscious we may recognise a dream-like quality without having much idea of the significance for the writer. But only with metaphor and paradox can we point to specific grammatical constructions which impede our usual, non-symbolic, interpretation of the words in them. It would take another paper to begin to describe them. But I wanted to remind us that, drab as the garments of grammar are usually portrayed, in poetry, at the heart of our aesthetic, even religious experience, lies her guiding presence. Or as other speakers and poets have reiterated, it is in the mundane that we may glimpse transcendence.

REFERENCES

[1] See Walter J. Ong, ch. 3, 'Some psychodynamics of orality,' *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982).

[2] For example in the closing lines, 3169-3182. *Beowulf* of course survives as a written poem.

[3] For example, again from Old English, in Alfred the Great's Laws, the traditional rhyming formula *ge ceorle ge eorle* ('both commoner and nobleman'). See F. L. Attenborough, ed. and trans., *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), and Simon Keynes & Michael Lapidge, *Alfred the Great* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 307, n. 14.

[4] In his famous *dictum*, 'The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination' (Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., 'Closing Statement: Linguistic and Poetics,' *Style in Language* [Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1960], p 358). Roman Jakobson accurately pointed to the oral residue of memorable repetition in the poetic tradition while misleadingly identifying that textual history with some universal character of the genre. In relation to the evolution of formal prose, I have in mind particularly those rhetorical figures of *elocutio* which name classes of repetition of word or grammatical structure, rather than sound patterning.

[5] An introductory discussion of some possible functions is given by John Haynes, 'Metre and Discourse,' in Ronald Carter & Paul Simpson, eds, *Language , Discourse and Literature* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp 234-256.

[6] Specifically, the model of language used in systemic functional theory. For example, see Suzanne Eggins, *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* (London: Pinter, 1994), pp 52-80.

[7] (London & New York: Routledge, 1994; first published as *English Poetry*, 1990), p 1.

[8] W.J.B. Owen & Jane Worthington Smyser, eds, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), Vol. III, pp. 64-65.
'.. the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' completes the last sentence in Barthes' famous and provocative piece, 'The Death of the Author,' in Stephen Heath, ed. and trans., *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), pp 142-148.

[9] (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p 1.

[10] Ibid, p 3.

[11] From *A Defence of Poetry*, extracted by David Hopkins, op. cit. p 58.

[12] Charles Tomlinson links this 'war-cry' to Williams' inheritance from Emerson and Thoreau, in his edition of *William Carlos Williams, Selected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1985), p xii.

[13] I use 'post-modernism' to describe a contemporary style, not to name a philosophical explanation or literary theory (for which the term 'post-structuralism' is more appropriate).

[14] *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p 620.

[15] *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p 84. I take the phrase 'the symbolic mode of reading' from Eco's discussion.

[16] *Sydney Morning Herald,* 19 October, 1985, p 1.

[17] Eco suggests that the public code of medieval exegesis, which can seem a licence for extravagant readings to us, was nevertheless an attempt by the Church fathers to limit interpretation (op. cit., pp 147-153). In secular symbolism there is no ship/ark of the church in which to travel safely but the metaphor of the voyage, especially the sea-voyage, for symbolic reading is a persistent one. See for example stanzas 5 to 8 of 'The Conceptual Head' in John Forbes poem, 'Four Heads & How to Do Them', first published in 1976. Reprinted in John Forbes, *New and Selected Poems*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1992, pp 8-12.