





experiences we greatly value, however, would be lost, such that it is hard to see that this exchange would be worthwhile.

There is a sense in which the poetic skill typical of oral cultures survives in song lyrics; but that is true only in a very meagre sense of that skill. Moreover, in song music typically drives the lyrics rather than being a mere accompaniment. There are exceptions, of course, but in any event, we do not need to settle for pop songwriters and singers as the true descendants of Homer and Sappho. As we have seen, oral poetic practices continue to thrive all around the globe. Perhaps more remarkable, they re-emerge even in quintessentially writing cultures such as that of modern American society. The spoken word poetry movement is proof in its very label that mainstream poetry is no longer spoken. But in its existence, it is also proof that poetry wants to speak, not to be mummified on a piece of paper, and that our oral heritage continues to live in us despite our own ample efforts to kill it.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Universities of Murcia (Spain, 2010), Houston (2010), and Cincinnati (2012). Many thanks to Francisco Pérez-Carreño, Cynthia Freedland, and Jennifer Robinson for inviting me to each of these respective places, and to the audiences there for their helpful questions and comments. Thanks also to Paisley Livingston and to an anonymous reader of Oxford University Press for their comments on a recent draft.

## 7

# Poetry and Truth

Roger Scruton

In 'The Origin of the Work of Art', Heidegger writes that 'the essence of poetry . . . is the founding (*Stiftung*) of truth'.<sup>1</sup> 'Founding' means 'bestowing, grounding and beginning', while 'truth', for Heidegger, names a process, an 'unconcealing', the authority for this being a somewhat forced etymology of the Greek word *alētheia*. Truth, he tells us, is a way in which things 'presence', so revealing their 'thingliness'. You could be forgiven for thinking that, in the context of this syntactical delirium, absolutely nothing is said by the assertion that the essence of poetry is the founding of truth. In these short remarks I hope to give a reading of that assertion, however, which makes it both important and true.

It is fairly obvious that Heidegger does not mean by 'truth' what, for instance, Tarski means in his great paper on the concept of truth in formalized languages. He is not writing about the *evaluation* of sentences as true or false, or the determination of truth-values by the semantic interpretation of syntactical parts. He is writing about a *revelation*, in which things come before the conscious mind in a way that shows what is otherwise hidden. 'Truth', he writes, 'is the original strife in which, always in some particular way, the open is won: that open within which everything stands and out of which everything withholds itself everything which, as a being, both shows and withdraws itself.'<sup>2</sup> Truth is a process which *wins through* to the reality of things. This reality consists in what things show, and what they withhold, when brought into the open. And poetry has a special part to play in this process: it is a 'bringing forth' which is also a 'bestowing'.

<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and tr. Julian Young and Kenneth Hayes, Cambridge, CUP, 2002, 47.

<sup>2</sup> Heidegger, 'Origin of the Work of Art', 36.

There are many religious texts which tell us that in this world we see 'through a glass darkly', and which promise another form of knowledge, acquired through spiritual discipline, through fasting and prayer; through the recital of sacred liturgies or perhaps only sacred syllables, whereby we confront things as God confronts them, so as to know them as they truly are. The 'truth' of things is that which is revealed when we see them at rest in their essences, so to speak, as God might see them when he wills them to be. Heidegger is attempting to give a secular version of this idea. And by attributing the process of revelation to *poetry*—in other words, to a human product, in which meaning is both created by human beings and also 'bestowed' by them—he can be understood as advocating revelation without God. In this he was at one with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who, in my view, is the real inspiration for Heidegger's view of poetry.

The idea that art can fulfil some of the promise of religion without the metaphysical payment is not new. In his great essay on 'Religion and Art' Wagner argued that religions have all misunderstood their own mission, wishing to propose as *true stories* what are in fact myths—in other words utterances of another kind, that cannot be spelled out in literal language.<sup>3</sup> The meaning of the myths must be grasped through art, which shows us the concealed deep truth of our condition, in dramatized and symbolic form. The truths hidden by religion, and revealed by art, are truths about us, about the archaeology of consciousness. Wagner is looking for a substitute for the religious worldview; another way of seeing our world *as if* the work of a creator, and *as if* we were its hidden goal. More bleakly, Nietzsche saw art and the aesthetic as the *successor* to the religious worldview, not a real compensation for what we lose when we discover that the world is purposeless, but the best that we can do to compensate for that discovery: 'we have art so that we will not perish of the truth'. Whether Heidegger was nearer to Wagner or to Nietzsche is, for my purpose, immaterial.

To explore the suggestion that poetry has something to do with truth we must first know what we mean by poetry. It is evident that poetic forms and poetic diction are by-products, and neither essential to the poetic enterprise nor always valued by those who engage in it. The heart of poetry is *the poetic use of language*. There is a way of using language

<sup>3</sup> Richard Wagner, 'Die Religion und die Kunst', in *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 2nd edn, 10 vols, Leipzig, 1887–8, x, 211.

that is fundamentally distinct from its everyday or scientific deployment, and it is this that is appreciated by the lovers of poetry. There is good, even beautiful, writing that is not poetic—the philosophical writing of Hume, for example, or the scientific writing of Darwin or Helmholtz. Such writers produce prose. The virtue of prose is the clear, precise, and literal description of its subject matter. The subject matter may be fictional—but still there is a distinction between the literal description of a fictional event and its poetic elaboration.

The poetic use of language may involve figures of speech, including metaphors, which do not describe the connections between things, but make those connections in the mind of the reader. Such connections can also be made by allusion, by irony, or by mere proximity, as in the following description of Octavia from *Antony and Cleopatra*:

Her tongue will not obey her heart, nor can  
Her heart inform her tongue—the swan's down feather,  
That stands upon the swell at full of tide,  
And neither way inclines...<sup>4</sup>

Shakespeare simply puts two subjects side by side, and at the same time evokes, through the rhythm of the verse, the experience first of the one and then of the other, so that the two come together. But they come together in the feelings of the audience—it is as though two experiences bleed into each other to become one.

Every time a writer chooses an image so as to evoke something other than the thing that he or she is describing we have an instance of this poetic use of language. A simile might do as well as a figure of speech, or the connection might be merely suggested, as when Yeats writes

Deceitful age, that has been tied to me  
As to a dog's tail...<sup>5</sup>

We think of the kind of things that are tied to dog's tails (certainly not age!) and of the circumstances in which this is done. And the ageing body of the poet inhabits then the same psychic space in the reader's mind as the ridiculous and humiliated dog.

<sup>4</sup> William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 3, 2, 5–60.

<sup>5</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Tower, A Facsimile Edition*, New York: Scribner, 2003, 4.

Poetic diction and verse-forms are important, largely because they facilitate these 'extra-curricular' connections—they prompt our thoughts to take in matters that lie beyond the horizon of the scene described. Consider this stanza from Thomas Hardy:

It will be much better when  
I am under the bough;  
I shall be more myself, Dear, then,  
Than I am now.<sup>6</sup>

This is almost prose; but not quite. The verse form, which fills out the third line to give a specious amplitude to the post-mortem anticipations of the imagined speaker, brings us to an abrupt dead end with the short line that follows. 'Than I am now' is so tight and bereft that you know that this speaker, who taunts his beloved with his future death, is dead already—dead to himself and to her. This connection is made, not in the things described, but in the feelings of the one who reads of them. Even without verse-forms and prosody it is possible to make connections through the rhythm, shape, and sound of a sentence without describing those connections directly, as all novelists know.

The poetic use of language deploys every device that can make the kind of connections that I have been describing: figures of speech, allusions, irony, and evocations induced by the sound and rhythm of the words. Many works of prose are really exercises in the poetic use of language—the *poèmes en prose* of Baudelaire, for example, or James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*. Contrariwise, many 'poems' are really versified prose, like the epics of William Morris. The distinction between the poetic and the prosaic use of language is a distinction that goes to the heart of aesthetics, since it outlines two distinct attitudes, both to language, and to the things that language describes. In an important sense the prosaic use of language is *instrumental*. The purpose is to place in the reader's mind a thought about something (which may be something fictional). The crucial feature of prose is its *aboutness*, the intentional relation with a subject matter, from which knowledge of that subject matter can be recuperated and put to use. Prosaic language is therefore guided by the interest in truth as correspondence—truth as discussed by Frege and Tarski. This

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hardy, 'When Dead'. In *Selected Poems*, ed. Robert Mezey. New York: Penguin Books, 1998, 170.

use of language requires the substitutivity of equivalent terms. In a prosaic sentence terms with the same sense can be replaced without defeating the purpose, so that both of the following might 'do just as well' for the author's purpose:

A knight, it was announced, might use a mace or battle-axe at pleasure, but the dagger was a prohibited weapon.

It was declared that mace and battle-axe were both permitted weapons for a knight, but that daggers were forbidden.

The reader might guess as to which of the sentences was written by Sir Walter Scott into the story of *Ivanhoe*. After all, they flow quite differently, and there are nuances in each that are not reproduced in the other. But the important point is that they are equally serviceable, for the purpose of moving the narrative along, and implanting in the reader's mind the information about the subject that is required by the story.

Things are quite otherwise with the poetic use of language. In an important sense the poetic utterance is to be understood *non-instrumentally*. Not only are the words and the allusions contained in them to be weighed and appreciated for their own sakes; the same is true of the subject matter too. The subject of the poem is not detachable from it in the way that the subject of prose is detachable. Of course, the poem might tell a story, like the *Iliad*, which could be told in another way. But if it is real poetry then much that it says will be lost when told in another way. The effect of poetry depends on the *way of telling*, or rather (to adapt a well-known distinction) on the *way of showing* what is told. Here I do not refer only to the specific words of the text, but also to such things as the order of events, the perspective from which they are recounted, the sequence of images, and the speed of the narrative. Homer is never at a loss for the right word, and he uses an amazing number of them; but he also abounds in easy-going formulae, which spare him the need to think of a new epithet when an old one will be just as serviceable. But Homer has the unflinching gift of arranging images, events, and actions in a sequence that causes each one to enter into fertile relation with its neighbours, so bringing the reader into the very centre of the drama and bringing the drama, as Heidegger would put it, 'into the open.'

The reader of Homer is invited not merely to take an interest in the action for its own sake, but also to attend to the way in which the action unfolds through the words. Neither the thing related, nor the relating

of it, is treated instrumentally. Each detail is there for its own sake, and this applies as much to the language as to the story. Hence the text is not (as in prose) erased by its own aboutness. The sound of the words, their associations, the things they call to mind, and all the other ways in which words and things can be connected, begin to compete in the reader's or listener's mind with the semantic content.

Of course, whether a use of language is, in the sense I am considering, poetic or prosaic is a matter of degree. Many things go on at once when words are used, and a writer might insert poetic flights of fancy into a work of prose, as Boethius did in *The Consolation of Philosophy*, or prosaic explanations into a work of poetry as T. S. Eliot did in the notes to *The Waste Land*. Nevertheless there are two poles between which literary language can range, with pure semantically guided description at one pole, and pure evocation and association at the other. Corresponding to those two poles there is a contrast between a purely instrumental use of words and a use of words to create and bestow intrinsic value. Hence there really is such a thing as poetry, and it really does present what it describes in another way from the way that it is presented in prosaic narrative. The question we have to answer is whether this other way of presenting things is connected with another kind of truth—a kind of truth beyond that contained in the philosopher's idea of correspondence.

Notice that I have already used a Heideggerian idiom in describing the poetic use of language. I have suggested that, in this use, language can bestow intrinsic value on the subject that it describes. It renders that subject interesting *for its own sake*, and this idiom automatically takes us into the realm of philosophical aesthetics, as this has been charted since Kant. When Keats writes his 'Ode to the Nightingale', he does not describe the bird and its song only: he endows it with value. The nightingale shares in the beauty of its description, and is lifted out of the ordinary run of events, to appear as a small part of the meaning of the world. We may think that this brief encounter with a transfigured bird is an illusion, merely an effect of the poet's persuasive power. But, the poet is insisting, it is *not* an illusion. The meaning bestowed by the words is also instilled by them. Poetry transfigures what it touches, so that it is revealed in another way. If it does not do so it is not truly poetry, but merely rhetoric. There is a test of the value of poetic language and this test is that of truth—truth in something like the sense that Heidegger is getting at, truth as revelation, as the unconcealing of what is, in our instrumental and scientific ways of dealing with the world, hidden from us.

This does not mean that a poet can be indifferent to truth in its ordinary (semantic) sense. A number of authors have argued—to my mind convincingly—that poems contain and depend upon thoughts which are put forward as literally true. There are didactic poems, like Pope's *Essay on Man* or Wallace Stevens's 'Sunday Morning', in which the reader is being invited to agree with a particular point of view, and in which the seriousness and sincerity of that point of view are vital to the poetic effect. More generally, as R. K. Elliott argued in a distinguished article that appeared in *Analysis* nearly half a century ago, poetic diction makes sense only if the choice of words is governed by the same concern for truth that informs our ordinary discourse.<sup>7</sup> Language is an inherently truth-tracking tool, and we cannot use it, even in its poetic application, without relying upon this feature. Consider this flight of fancy from Verlaine ('Il Bacio'):

Baiser! rose tremière au jardin des caresses!  
Vif accompagnement sur le clavier des dents  
Des doux refrains qu'Amour chante en les cœurs ardents,  
Avec sa voix d'archange aux langoureux charmeses!<sup>8</sup>

Outside the poetic context who would think of a kiss as a hollyhock in a garden? But it is true that hollyhocks grow in gardens. It is true too that carresses weave and cling like undergrowth, and that the kiss rises to another plane, as hollyhocks, the tallest of garden flowers, stand out above the undergrowth. It is nonsense to describe the kiss as an accompaniment played on the keyboard of the teeth, but then the teeth are like a keyboard, are made of the same material, and hold the kiss in place in something like the way that an accompaniment anchors a melody. As we are carried along by the poem we find no difficulty in absorbing the picture of kissing that it offers us, and the elaboration of this picture depends at every point upon the truth-tracking nature of language. The striking image of 'le clavier des dents' depends for its force on our knowledge of the mouth, the smile, the gateway to the other that the teeth can open and close, as well as our knowledge of the keyboard and its uses.

These truths upon which the poetic effect depends are not, however, the subject matter of the poem. They belong to the frame on which the

<sup>7</sup> R. K. Elliott, 'Poetry and Truth', *Analysis*, 27/3 (1967): 77–85.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Verlaine and Karl Kirchwey, *Poems Under Saturn: Poemes Saturniens*, tr. Karl Kirchwey, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, 98.

image is hung. As Peter Lamarque has pointed out, a work whose point is to express a truth is capable of paraphrase. A paraphrase that captured the thought (which had the same truth-conditions) would serve the purpose just as well.<sup>9</sup> But it is a commonplace of criticism that there is, in Cleanth Brooks's phrase, a 'heresy of paraphrase'—a heresy which stems from thinking that poetry is valued for what it literally says, rather than for its own special way of saying it.<sup>10</sup>

The point is clear. But it leaves us with two unanswered questions. First, what is the difference between a didactic poem and a work of prose? Secondly, what remains of the Heideggerian thesis that the essence of poetry is the 'founding' of truth? In response to the first of those questions philosophers and critics have variously claimed that the purpose of a didactic poem is not to persuade readers but in some way to help them to imagine the world as the poet describes it, to discover in themselves the experiential equivalent of a doctrine and thereby to understand a human possibility, whether or not they also endorse that possibility as one that they could or would live by. The poet and philosopher John Koethe suggests, in this connection, that what the didactic poem 'tries to do is not to persuade the reader of the truth of (the expressed) thoughts, but to get him so to speak, to enter into them.'<sup>11</sup> The idea is that we value poems not for the truth of what they say, but for the role that their thoughts might play in a life of feeling.

The point was made in other terms by T. S. Eliot, in an early essay on Shelley, and later, in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, where he tries to justify his low opinion of Shelley as a poet.<sup>12</sup> Eliot criticizes Shelley not for the atheistical views expressed in his poems—much as Eliot disapproved of them—but because these views are entertained (so Eliot claimed) in a puerile way. They are not put to the test, not given the kind of poetic examination which would show how a life of serious feeling could be built on them. They lack the seriousness and sincerity that would make them worthy of imaginative endorsement.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Lamarque, 'Poetry and Abstract Thought', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 33 (2009), 37–52.

<sup>10</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, New York: Harcourt, 1968.

<sup>11</sup> 'Poetry and Truth', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 33 (2009), 58.

<sup>12</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Such, in a nutshell, was Eliot's answer to the problem of 'poetry and belief', and, like Koethe's answer, it is incomplete. The argument tells us that poetry does not treat doctrinal statements as prose treats them, namely as statements to be judged for their truth-value. But it also tells us that poetry puts doctrine to the test in some way, and that this test has something to do with experience. We are fumbling our way towards the idea that poetry is really exploring (or bestowing) a truth of its own, not literal truth, to be sure, but something just as deserving of the name. Can we complete the thought?

We should make a distinction here between lyrical and dramatic poetry—between poetry that is presenting its own point of view, and poetry that articulates the state of mind of *another*, whose words are to be completed by a dramatic context. Ugly characters in drama can be given powerful verse, like Shakespeare's *Richard III*. And a bumbling old buffer can be prompted into poetry by ancient music, like the imagined speaker of Browning's 'A Toccata of Galuppi'. In most lyrical poetry, however, it is not 'another' who speaks, but the poem itself, and the poet in the poem. The contrast here is not sharp, since lyric poetry may suggest a dramatic context to fit the words. (Hence Browning's description of his poems as 'dramatic lyrics'.) Nevertheless, we are used to reading poetry in two different ways—as addressed to us directly, or as part of a dialogue between imagined speaker and imagined listener. Love lyrics and religious poetry like that of George Herbert provide an intermediate case. While addressed to another, in a defined context, the poet disappears behind his words, and leaves them as the universal expression of a state of mind that is available to all of us, should we choose to adopt his words.

Given these contrasting uses of poetic language we might be tempted to argue that the truth bestowed by poetry is simply a matter of 'truthfulness'—that is to say, truth to the state of mind that is ostensibly expressed, whether on behalf of an imagined character, or on behalf of the poet, or on behalf of the reader. Poetry succeeds when it is sincere, true to the sentiments that it claims and which command our respect; it fails when it lays claim to sentiments that it fails to encompass, because its words are false, banal or empty. For example it may be composed of expressions which are borrowed, assumed as a matter of convention, riddled with clichés, so as to claim a grandeur or seriousness which it does not attain. The distinction between the true and the false in poetry is, on this view, the distinction between true and false sentiment, between real emotion and 'faking it'.

That is certainly the view that we might extract from the tradition of Anglophone criticism in our time, and notably from the essays of Leavis and Eliot. For those critics the principal failing exhibited by poetry is sentimentality, which lays claim to emotion in order to disguise the lack of it. The enemy is the 'undisciplined squads of emotion' evoked in *Four Quartets*, which swamp the poet's words with imprecise feelings that are not really feelings at all, since they come wrapped in clichés and stock devices, and avoid any direct encounter with reality. The task of the modern poet, as Eliot (borrowing from Mallarmé) expressed the point, is to 'purify the dialect of the tribe'; that is, to find the words, rhythms, and images that would make contact with the world as it is lived by us, here, now. The poetic use of language is necessary because the world as lived is not the world as described. To convey the world as it is lived is to evoke both the object and the subject of consciousness. And it is to take a critical and exploratory stance towards them both. In this enterprise allusions are as important as statements. In Eliot quotations too are important, not in order to borrow others' sentiments, but in order to evoke a tradition of poetic reflection which stands in judgement on the poet's experience, and warns against the easy way of avoiding real predicaments through kitsch and cliché.

'Ash-Wednesday' opens with the following lines:

Because I do not hope to turn again  
 Because I do not hope  
 Because I do not hope to turn  
 Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope  
 I no longer strive to strive towards such things . . .<sup>13</sup>

Only the last of those lines is wholly Eliot's. Cavalcanti's lament over his exile from Tuscany begins,

*Perch' i' no spero di tornar giammai  
 Ballata, in Toscana*<sup>14</sup>

Eliot's 'to turn' echoes the Italian 'tornare', which here means to return, not to turn. Cavalcanti's geographical exile becomes, in Eliot's allusion, a metaphysical exile. The impossibility of turning back, of undoing what has

been done, is immediately connected to the loss of hope, and this hope, a passing state of mind in Cavalcanti, becomes the centre of poetic attention in Eliot. Cavalcanti laments the loss of his Tuscan home; Eliot the loss of hope. The poem is about despair, and the despair that comes from guilt. The fourth line is lifted straight from Shakespeare's sonnet no. 29 ('When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes . . .') but with a subtle change of 'art' to 'gift'—so opening the way to a theological reading. Eliot has implicitly compared his poetical efforts with those of his great predecessors, borrowing and altering their words in order to emphasize how much he falls short—and going on to write one of the greatest invocations of humility in the English language. This artful use of quotation conveys the sense of a burdened consciousness—a subjectivity shaped by other poets' sincere expressions, full of a self-doubt which comes from the knowledge that the needed words have already been found, but found in another context when hope for this or that had been lost, but hope itself remained. Eliot is able in this way to convey a new experience, one true to our time and our situation, one in which a kind of metaphysical bereavement is craving solace and encountering only the discomfort of comforts that have gone.

You may think that Eliot does not succeed, either here or in the sequel, *Four Quartets*, in giving voice to the distinctive experience that concerns him. Nevertheless, his attempt gives a clear meaning to the suggestion that poetry 'bestows' a kind of truth on its subject matter. Eliot is looking for the sincere expression of a new experience, one that will remain true to its inner dynamic, and show what it is to *live* that experience in the self-awareness of a modern person. He is looking for words that both capture the experience and lend themselves to sincere and committed use. Banal words, clichés, sentimental invocations—all these can be easily found. But they are words only: the task is to find words which are compelled by a real and heartfelt intention, words whose meaning lies in an experience that demands them. Eliot's borrowings vividly convey the problem, and turn his thoughts sincerely towards the lost art of prayer:

Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the  
 garden,  
 Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood  
 Teach us to care and not to care . . .<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909–1962*. Franklin Center, PA: Harcourt Brace

Jovanovich, 1991, 85.

<sup>14</sup> Guido Cavalcanti, *The Selected Poetry of Guido Cavalcanti: A Critical English Edition*, ed. Simon West. Leicester: Troubador, 2009, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Cavalcanti, *Selected Poetry*, 95.



The example illustrates the claim that poetry bestows a kind of truth on its subject matter. Words that can be sincerely uttered show an experience that can be truly felt. And this in turn shows the world in another light, as a world where feeling finds its fulfilment, and where object and subject meet in mutual influence.

However, the account seems to imply that the truth bestowed by poetry is a truth only at the subjective level. The 'grounding' of which Heidegger writes seems rather to require that the truth bestowed by poetry is also discerned in the world of objects: it is a truth of 'the things themselves'. What do we make of that thought?

It should be recognized that Heidegger's paradigms of the poetic art do not include the massively allusive and critically burdened verse of Eliot. For Heidegger a work of poetry is, typically, a record of a thing, and of the 'thingliness' of the thing. Such is Hölderlin's tribute to the river Ister (subject of a course of lectures by Heidegger), and Rilke's invocation of the earth in the ninth of *Duino Elegies*. The obfuscation that is second nature to Heidegger makes it look as though he has discerned another kind of poetic truth—a truth about the inner reality of objects. Thus Rilke's rhetorical question:

Sind wir vielleicht hier, um zu sagen: Haus,  
Brücke, Brunnen, Tor, Krug, Obstbaum, Fenster,—  
höchstens: Säule, Turm . . . aber zu sagen, versteht,  
oh zu sagen so, wie selber die Dinge niemals  
innig meinten zu sein.<sup>16</sup>

But, rightly understood, Rilke is endorsing the position that I have been exploring. The meaning of things is *bestowed* on them by poetry, through the act of *saying* them, in a form that they 'never thought inwardly to be'. The truth, even here, the truth of the house, bridge, fountain, gate, jug, fruit tree, and window, even the truth of pillar and tower, is a truth bestowed in the experience. Its measure is the depth with which these things can be taken into consciousness and made part of a life fully lived. Their inner meaning is bestowed in the poetic encounter, when the subject with all his associations and quests is, as it were, made present to himself in the object that he observes.

Why is it so important to us, that we endow the world with meanings? And can we distinguish the right endowment from the wrong one? Or do we do this only 'so as not to perish from the truth'? I conclude with a suggestion. Following the path suggested by Heidegger we come to the conclusion that there is an 'inner truth' to things, and that this truth is bestowed by poetry. But the inwardness is the inwardness of our own experience—the fusing of a thing with its associations and life-significance in the poetic moment. These poetic moments are, as Eliot teaches us, achievements. They are not random associations but the fruit of a life lived in full awareness. In the normal run of things, in a life governed by instrumental reasoning and focused on transient goals, things pass us by. They are mere contingencies, which might not have been, and which occupy no place in our thoughts beyond the thought of their utility. But all self-conscious beings are able to live in another way: not swept up in contingencies but asking for their ground, and striving to see them as they are in themselves. Things then reveal their thingliness: they draw attention to their own contingency and compel from us the question *why* for what end, and with what meaning does the world come to fruition in *this*? We cannot look to science for an answer, since science does not permit the question. But we sense the urgency of the question nevertheless. The right answer is the answer that enables us to incorporate the things of this world into a fulfilled life. For each individual object, each house, bridge, fountain, gate, or jug, there is such an answer. And the poet is the one who provides it. His answer is false when it sentimentalizes, hiding the thing behind a veil of wishful thinking. His answer is true when it shows how just such a thing might be part of a fulfilled human life, and one in which the object is valued for its own sake, as a vehicle of meaning.

<sup>16</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Ninth Elegy', *The Poetry of Rilke*, bilingual edn, tr. Edward A. Snow, 1st edn, New York: North Point Press, 2009, 334.

