

Josemaría Escrivá
Furrow (1986)

When you started your ordinary work again, something like a groan of complaint escaped you: “It’s always the same!”

And I told you: “Yes, it’s always the same. But that ordinary job —which is the same one your fellow workers do — has to be a constant prayer for you. It has the same lovable words, but a different tune each day.”

It is very much our mission to transform the prose of this life into poetry, into heroic verse.

Josef Pieper

Three Talks in a Sculptor's Studio: *Vita Contemplativa*—The Contemplative Life (1985)

I come here as a guest, kindly received and connected to you in friendship, not really endowed with great expertise in art (some have declared me entirely devoid of any), yet claiming a somewhat philosophical and reflective mind. As such I have had the opportunity for several decades now to follow and observe closely what was going on and happening in this studio. Today I wish to express as best I can how I perceive the artistic work of our mutual friend—what makes it unique and what distinguishes it from so many things that dominate the contemporary art scene.

The distinguishing and characterizing element in the artistic creativity we celebrate today lies, as I am convinced, in this: we witness an expression of the contemplative life, the *vita contemplativa*.

This at first sounds surprising if not outright unbelievable to anybody who has ever observed, maybe many times, how great a manual exertion is required, up to the limits of physical endurance (and sometimes beyond), to bring about the plaster or clay model of a particular sculpture. All the same, I still say: the beginning of it all is contemplation!

This concept can hardly be explained in a brief definition. Its immediate and direct meaning indicates seeing, beholding, perceiving some reality. Incidentally, you may find it astonishing how much and how unanimously the great thinkers of the Western tradition have extolled that attitude of receptive observation. The earliest statement, one hundred years before Plato, comes to us from the city of Athens, from Anaxagoras, who to the catechism-like question, "Why are you here on earth?" replied, "To behold" — *eis theorian* (a Greek expression, later translated by the Romans as *contemplatio*). And from Anaxagoras we can go to Goethe and Teilhard de Chardin. In Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften* (*Elective Affinities*) we read: "Our self-awareness is always connected to seeing. I believe our dreams have only one purpose: that our seeing may not be interrupted." Teilhard de Chardin prefaces his major work on the *Phenomenon of Man* with a rather strange and seemingly unrelated prologue. He states that all life is contained in the act of seeing, and that the entire evolution of the universe has as its final aim nothing else but the bringing forth of ever more perfect eyes. So, once again: to contemplate means first of all to *see*—and not to *think*!

...The true artist, however, is not someone who simply and in any way whatever "sees" things. So that he can create form and image (not only in bronze and stone but through word and speech as well), he must be endowed with the ability to see in an exceptionally *intensive* manner. The concept of contemplation also contains this special intensified way of seeing. A twofold meaning is hereby intended: the gift of retaining and preserving in one's own memory whatever has been visually perceived. How meticulously, how intensively—with the heart, as it were—must a sculptor have gazed on a human face before being able, as is our friend here, to render a portrait, as if by magic, entirely from memory! And this is our second point: to *see* in contemplation, moreover, is not limited only to the tangible surface of reality; it certainly perceives more than mere appearances. Art flowing from contemplation does not so much attempt to copy reality as rather to capture the *archetypes* of all that is. Such art does not want to depict what everybody already sees but to make visible what not everybody sees.

If we now look from this perspective at the artistic work before us, we clearly see an art that is

neither-nor: neither is it "abstract", much less "absolute" art, which is indifferent to the forms of the visible world; *nor* can we speak of a blunt and merely descriptive realism. These two somewhat involuted opposites need an explanation; after all, what do we mean by "neither realism nor abstraction"? To this end we have to consider a certain aspect of the term "contemplation", so far not yet mentioned. For even the most intensive seeing and beholding may not yet be true contemplation. Rather, the ancient expression of the mystics applies here: *ubi amor, ibi oculus* — the eyes see better when guided by love; a new dimension of "seeing" is opened up by love alone! And this means contemplation is visual perception prompted by loving acceptance!

I hold that this is the specific mark of seeing things in contemplation: it is motivated by loving acceptance, by an affectionate affirmation. Nothing would be more alien to our sculptor friend and her work than to revile, despise, and distort reality, or explicitly to destroy all ordered form—not at all a rare phenomenon nowadays. Not only her madonnas, her portraits, her statues of children, her "Girl with a Ginkgo Leaf"—not only these but even the tortured and contorted face of the crucified thief, his mouth gaping in a last cry for help—even this proclaims an affectionate devotion to mankind and all things created.

And yet, nothing in this affirming closeness to reality smacks of false idealization, nothing is embellished as if all reality were wholesome and without rough edges—not even in those instances when her statues succeed in embodying "beauty" itself. Once again, this too is the result of a certain characteristic of seeing things in loving contemplation. This characteristic is difficult to define, and I am not at all certain I can find the right words. Yet I shall try. The German language, in its vocabulary concerning loving attitudes, uses the rather curious expression, *sich nicht satt sehen können* ("can't see enough" of something), which, indeed, has a twofold meaning. In one respect, it indicates utmost delight; thus new parents "can't see enough" of their baby. But then it also means that the desire to "see enough" is never satisfied. In this craving to "see" there is a dimension that—as a matter of fact, even of necessity—*always* remains unfulfilled! Decisive here is whether an artist experiences and accepts this. Those in the fine arts who all too hastily have "seen enough"; that is, those who are satisfied with the outward appearance of things, may easily be content with contriving some smooth and crowd-pleasing yet shallow fabrication. Those, however, who have—perhaps painfully—experienced and accepted, even in the delight of their beholding eyes, that ultimately their longing will not and cannot be fulfilled, those will be unable to create mere pleasing, agreeable, frictionless art. Konrad Weiss once remarked, "Contemplation will not be satisfied until blinded by the object of its ultimate desires." Such a statement almost leads us beyond the confines of this world.

John Hildebidle A Word on Origins

How do poems happen? ... You are no doubt well aware of the Muses, the classical myths which account for the sources of the arts. Nine sisters, daughters of Apollo, each of whom takes responsibility for one area, each of whom (as in the current film) can be summoned or invoked or prayed to, but each of whom reserves the right (again, as in the current film) either not to reply or to reply in a where does it *come* from, this stuff we call poetry? I taught a seminar on contemporary poetry last spring, and I kept bumping into injunctions like this one, from A. R. Ammons: "To pay attention is the beginning of wonder." Or, I am arguing, of poetry. And lest we think that poetry and science are wholly disparate realms, this from a poet who happens, along the way, to write wonderful essays about natural history, Diane Ackerman:

Both science and art have the habit of waking us up, turning on the lights, grabbing us by the collar and saying *Would you please pay attention!*

Or this, offered by – of all things – a mathematician from Brooklyn whose specialty is computer security systems:

The job of the poet is, in part, to see around the corners, through the darkness and to find the darn simple elegance of the human situation.

Or this, from a poet-critic of some renown, based at Yale:

this too is the work of poetry: to absorb and transfigure the reach of the eye or the underworld of the heart.

J. D. McClatchy

We are back in mystery-land, I think – at least the "reach of the eye" in the physical/optical sense is a lot easier to grasp and measure than the "underworld of the heart." And therein lies the adventure. An interesting poet named Kathleen Norris has gotten very involved with Benedictine monasticism in recent years, despite a prior religious autobiography that drifted from wishy-washy Protestantism to fashionable intellectual skepticism. She propounds a formulation very close, as it happens, to that averred by Robert Frost: that a poem, a *good* poem at least, "begins in delight and ends in wisdom." I should offer, parenthetically at least, my understanding that the question before us is how *good* poems happen – not Hallmark cards or those abhorrent verses to be found at the Blue Mountain Crafts Website or (to make my position clear) most if not all of what is offered at "poetry slams."

The bottom line is that the Muses can be invoked but not commanded; poems can be encountered or experienced but not forced very effectively. The Nobel Prize winner Joseph Brodsky once observed that "Poetry is a tremendous school of insecurity and uncertainty. You never know whether what you've done is any good, still less whether you'll be able to do anything good tomorrow." The Muses, fickle as they are, do not always sing, and when they resist the poet's summons, she/he is left in the posture defined, painfully, by an intriguingly-named Irishman: Iggy McGovern.

MUSELESS

*The sullen page
will not engage
with the thin pen;
no prayer or Zen
mantra divine
a single line
nor scan of ceiling
stir up feeling
nor cups of tea
breed verity,
just the curse
of being worse
than (m)useless?*

The final question mark is syntactically dubious, but spiritually and metaphorically right on the mark.

But let us take seriously the injunction that poems arise from attention. What do we need to pay attention to, we poets (and, for that matter, readers of poetry)? First, language itself. The American W. S. Merwin has offered this:

*At the last minute a word is waiting
not heard that way before and not to be
repeated or ever be remembered
one that always had been a household word
used in speaking of the ordinary
everyday occurrence of living
not newly chosen or long considered
or a matter for comment afterward*

Some advice from a woman who for a while taught at MIT, Denise Levertov, who all-too-neatly combines my two principles – pay attention to the words, and pay attention to the world:

I think it's like this: first there must be an experience, a sequence or constellation of perceptions of sufficient interest, felt by the poet internally enough to demand of him their equivalence in words; he is *brought to speech*. Suppose there's the sight of the sky through a dusty window, birds and clouds and bits of paper flying through the sky, the sound of music from his radio, feelings of anger and love and amusement roused by a letter just received, the memory of some long-past thought or event associated with what's seen or heard or felt, and an idea, a concept, he has been pondering, each qualifying the other; together with what he knows about history and what he has been dreaming – whether or not he remembers it – working in him. . . [T]he condition of being a poet is that periodically such a cross section, or

constellation, or experiences . . . demands, or wakes in him this demand: the poem. The beginning of the fulfillment of this demand is to contemplate, to meditate; words which connote a state in which the heat of feeling warms the intellect. . . [T]o meditate is “to muse,” to muse comes from a word meaning “to stand with open mouth” – not so comical if we think of “inspiration” – to breathe in.

Where then do poems begin, or arise, or whatever it is they do, to get to the page? Nobody seems to know, but it has something to do with an almost mystical impulse. That is what the myths of the Muses try to encompass, and I would humbly offer a proposition. We, all of us, rely on Muses. Some of us work in fields – like music or lyric poetry – with a long-standing name for our Muse. Some of us need to find new names. On the one hand, what does it matter what they are called; my point is that we honor the more-or-less mystical sources of inspiration that drives the work of all of us.

Dana Gioia

Poetry as Enchantment

Let me begin with three crucial observations about the art of poetry. First, it is the oldest form of literature. Indeed, it is the primal form of all literature. Poetry even predates history because it not only existed, but flourished before the invention of writing. As an oral art, it did not require the alphabet or any other form of visual inscription to develop and perfect a vast variety of meters, forms, and genres. Before writing, poetry—or perhaps one should say—stood at the center of culture as the most powerful way of remembering, preserving, and transmitting the identity of a tribe, a culture, a nation. Verse was humanity's first memory and broadcast technology—a technology originally transmitted only by the human body. In Robert Frost's astute formulation, poetry was 'a way of remembering what it would impoverish us to forget.'

...

Third and finally, poetry originated as a form of vocal music. It began as a performative and auditory medium, linked to music and dance and associated with civic ceremony, religious ritual, and magic. (The earliest poetry almost certainly served a shamanistic function.) Most aboriginal cultures did not distinguish poetry from song because the arts were so interrelated as to be porous. Nor did the classical Greek or Chinese cultures two or three millennia ago differentiate poetry from song. Verse was not spoken in a conversational manner, which was an early twentieth century development. Poetic speech was always stylized—usually either chanted rhythmically or sung, sometimes even sung and danced in chorus.

In oral culture, there is no separation between the poet and the poem. The author is a performer who vocalizes the words. Creation and performance are inseparably linked. Without writing, a 'text' has no existence outside the auditory performance. What matters is not fidelity to some invisible Platonic text, but the efficacy of the performance in casting a spell of heightened attention over the audience—whom the poet or performer can actually see. Purely verbal forms of poetry only emerged gradually, probably after the invention of writing, but the art's musical origins were preserved coded in the meter and other formal elements. The development of phonetic and logographic writing systems made it possible to preserve the text of a poem on a page, and scribal technology gradually allowed poems to be written for the page. But even then authors were reluctant to sever the relationship between poet and singer. Until quite recently, poets still assumed that the typographic text would be vocalized in some way by the reader.

...

The notion of poetry as song can be extended to a metaphysical level, as Rainer Maria Rilke did in his *Sonnets to Orpheus*. 'Gesang ist Dasein,' Rilke asserts, 'Singing is being.' In Rilke's view, the act of singing, by which he means the creation of real poetry in the primal Orphic sense, represents a different mode of existence from speech or silence. (Significantly, he appropriates the figure of Orpheus, the mythic first poet, whose songs could change reality.) ... Poetry speaks most effectively and inclusively (whether in free or formal verse) when it recognizes its connection—without apology—to its musical and ritualistic origins. No one watching a rock concert would claim that sung poetry makes nothing happen, though exactly what happens in the Dionysian exhilaration of the crowd remains more mysterious and various than often assumed. ...

Plato responded to the dangers of poetry by suggesting—with notorious lack of success—that its practitioners be banished from the ideal state. (Contemporary thinkers have enjoyed far more success in suppressing poetry by sequestering it in the classroom.) Plato recognized poetry’s power to convey meaning in ways that did not foster conscious and reasonable response. What Plato noticed, in other words, was that poetry was a species of song. What he feared was its Dionysian enchantment.

II

Poetry withers and dies out when it leaves music, or at least imagined music.

—Ezra Pound

The underlying musical nature of poetry is a primary reason why, as T. S. Eliot observed about Dante, ‘Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.’ Poetic language expresses itself as a totality, not as a transparent vessel for conceptual content—just as music and dance express meaning in ways that are physical and sensory rather than analytical. ...

It is significant that the Latin word for poetry, *carmen*, is also the word the Romans used for a song, a magic spell, a religious incantation, or a prophecy—all verbal constructions whose auditory powers can produce a magical effect on the listener. Ancient cultures believed in the power of speech. To curse or bless someone had profound meaning. A spoken oath was binding. A spell or prophecy had potency. The term *carmen* still survives in modern English (via Norman French) as the word *charm*, and it still carries the multiple meanings of a magic spell, a spoken poem, and the power to enthrall. Even today charms survive in oral culture. Looking at a stormy sky, surely a few children still recite the spell:

Rain, rain
go away.
Come again
some other day.

Or staring at the evening sky, they whisper to Venus, the evening star:

Star light, star bright,
First star I see tonight,
I wish I may, I wish I might
Have the wish I wish tonight.

A rational adult understands that neither the star nor the spell has any physical power to transform reality in accordance with the child’s wish. But the poet knows that by articulating a wish, by giving it tangible form, the child can potentially awaken the forces of imagination and desire that animate the future. As André Breton proposed, ‘The imaginary tends to become real.’

...

Literature has many uses, not all of which occur in a classroom. Poetry would not be a universal human practice if it did not serve large and various purposes. People have sung or chanted poems to sow and reap, court reluctant lovers, march into battle, lull infants to sleep, and call the faithful to worship. Poetry gave humanity the words to get through life. Most of those once common

occasions for poetry seem embarrassingly old-fashioned now that piped-in tunes and hand-held devices provide the background music for life's journey. But even in its diminished state, poetry must still provide something valuable to ordinary lives, or it would have vanished utterly. Poems can be analyzed, but that sort of intellection is a secondary activity. There are more elemental reasons why the art exists and has been integrated into so many human places and situations. To have survived since the beginnings of the race, the art must still be useful in some basic way. ...

...

Poetry is a distinct category of language—a special way of speaking that invites and rewards a special way of listening. Poetry is often subtle and sometimes even occult in its meaning, but it is rarely shy about announcing its status as a separate kind of language. In oral culture, poetry needs to sound different from ordinary speech in the very form of its saying to earn its special attention and response. The purpose of sonic features, such as meter, rhyme, alliteration, is partially to make verse immediately distinguishable from speech or prose. 'I came to poetry,' said Donald Hall, 'for the sound it makes.' Poetry is not merely different in degree from ordinary language—more images, more metaphors, more rhythm—it differs fundamentally in how it communicates. All poetic technique exists to enchant—to create a mild trance state in the listener or reader in order to heighten attention, relax emotional defenses, and rouse our full psyche, so that we hear and respond to the language more deeply and intensely. Camille Paglia speculates that 'poetry subliminally manipulates the body and triggers its nerve impulses, the muscle tremors of sensation and speech.' To borrow Franz Kafka's more violent metaphor about literature in general, poetry is 'the axe to break the frozen sea within us.'

The aim of poetry—in this primal and primary sense as enchantment—is to awaken us to a fuller sense of our own humanity in both its social and individual aspects. Poetry offers a way of understanding and expressing existence that is fundamentally different from conceptual thought. As Jacques Maritain observed, 'poetry is not philosophy for the feeble-minded.' It is a different mode of knowing and communicating the world. There are many truths about existence that we can only express authentically as a song or a story. Conceptual language, which is the necessary medium of the critic and scholar, primarily addresses the intellect. It is analytical, which is to say, it takes things apart, as the Greek root of the word *ana-lyein*, *to unloosen*, suggests. Conceptual discourse abstracts language from the particular to the general. Poetic language, however, is holistic and experiential. Poetry simultaneously addresses our intellect and our physical senses, our emotions, imagination, intuition, and memory without asking us to divide them. The text may be frozen on the page for easy visual inspection and analysis, but the poetic experience itself is temporal, individual, and mostly invisible. As Wallace Stevens wrote, 'Poetry is a pheasant disappearing in the brush.'

V

...

This consideration of poetry's formal nature and human purposes presents a paradox. If poetry is the most ancient and primal art, if it is a universal human activity, if it uses the rhythmic power of music to speak to us in deep and mysterious ways, if the art is a sort of secular magic that heightens the sense of our own humanity, then why is poetry so unpopular? Why has poetry, as so many instructors complain, become so hard to teach? Why is poetry disappearing from the curriculum at every level of education? Why has poetry gradually vanished from public discourse and the media?

And, finally, why has all this happened—at least in most of Western Europe and North America—despite huge, ongoing investments from governmental, academic, and philanthropic institutions to support the creation, teaching, publishing, discussion, promotion, and preservation of poetry?

There are, of course, many reasons for poetry's retreat from cultural life, not the least of which is the proliferation of new technologies for information and entertainment, including media that have usurped the basic modes of song and storytelling that have traditionally been the mission of literature. But there have also been intellectual and education trends that have stunted poetry's appeal and popularity. Poetry has always played a significant role in education. It has been used for millennia at every level of instruction. In cultures as different as classical China, Imperial Rome, and Elizabethan England, poetry served as the central subject matter of the curriculum. The schools attended by Tu Fu, St. Augustine, and William Shakespeare, for example, used verse texts and even metrical composition in many subjects.

Until quite recently poetry was taught badly—at least according to current academic standards. Poetry was used to teach grammar, elocution, and rhetoric. It was employed to convey history, both secular and sacred, often to instill patriotic sentiment and religious morality. Poetry was chanted in chorus at female academies. It was copied to teach cursive handwriting and calligraphy. It was memorized by wayward schoolboys as punishment. It was recited by children at public events and family gatherings. Being able to write verse was considered a social grace in both domestic and public life. Going to school meant becoming well versed.

For thousands of years, poetry was taught badly, and consequently it was immensely popular. Readers loved the vast and variable medium of verse. It wasn't a forbidding category of high literary art; it was the most pleasurable way in which words could be put together. Poetry was used in schools at least in part because it was considered more engaging than prose for children. Even in the late nineteenth century, poets such as Longfellow, Byron, Tennyson, and Kipling were international figures who outsold their prose competitors. But poetry's existence on the pages of books, even the best-selling books, represented only a fraction of its cultural presence. Poetry flourished at the borders between print and oral culture—places where single poems could be read and then shared aloud. Poetry was read most widely in newspapers, magazines, almanacs, and popular anthologies. A poet could become internationally famous through the publication of a single poem, as in the case of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Raven.' Edwin Markham's poem 'The Man with the Hoe,' which dramatized the oppression of labor, was quickly reprinted in 10,000 newspapers and magazines. Laurence Binyon's 'For the Fallen' gave solace to millions of mourners for the dead of World War I. Critics may denigrate these poems, but the magnitude of their reception is indisputable. Poetry permeated the culture at all levels. It was read and recited by people of all classes. They may not have admired the same texts as Ezra Pound did, and they didn't discuss verse in the manner of T. S. Eliot, but poetry played a part in their personal formation and continued to shape their imagination.

What happened? I suspect that one thing that hurt poetry was being too well taught. ... Classroom instruction gradually narrowed to a few types of textual analysis, increasingly taught to students with limited experiential knowledge of poetry. Coursework focused on critical dissection and conceptual paraphrase of printed texts. Academic success depended on the student's ability to replicate these forms of analysis in written work. Needless to say, this process represented a radical departure from the pedagogy of half a century earlier, which had been more eclectic, performative, and auditory. The new methods may have produced more sophisticated teachers of poetry, but they reduced the appeal of the art to most students. Ironically, the emphasis on textual analysis and critical theory also had a parochial quality. In its attempt to train everyone in the specialized techniques of professional

academic study, it mistook the basic goal of literature courses in the general curriculum. The purpose of literary education is not to produce more professors; its goal is to develop capable and complete human beings.

Sylvia Plath
Black Rook in Rainy Weather

On the stiff twig up there
Hunches a wet black rook
Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain-
I do not expect a miracle
Or an accident

To set the sight on fire
In my eye, nor seek
Any more in the desultory weather some design,
But let spotted leaves fall as they fall
Without ceremony, or portent.

Although, I admit, I desire,
Occasionally, some backtalk
From the mute sky, I can't honestly complain:
A certain minor light may still
Lean incandescent

Out of kitchen table or chair
As if a celestial burning took
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then —
Thus hallowing an interval
Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor
One might say love. At any rate, I now walk
Wary (for it could happen
Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); sceptical
Yet politic, ignorant

Of whatever angel any choose to flare
Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook
Ordering its black feathers can so shine
As to seize my senses, haul
My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear
Of total neutrality. With luck,
Trekking stubborn through this season
Of fatigue, I shall
Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur.
If you care to call those spasmodic

Tricks of radiance
Miracles. The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel,

For that rare, random descent.

Robert Hass
Measure

Recurrences.
Coppery light hesitates
again in the small-leaved

Japanese plum. Summer
and sunset, the peace
of the writing desk

and the habitual peace
of writing, these things
form an order I only

belong to in the idleness
of attention. Last light
rims the blue mountain

and I almost glimpse
what I was born to,
not so much in the sunlight

or the plum tree
as in the pulse
that forms these lines.

Christian Wiman
Every Riven Thing

God goes, belonging to every riven thing he's made
sing his being simply by being
the thing it is:
stone and tree and sky,
man who sees and sings and wonders why

God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he's made,
means a storm of peace.
Think of the atoms inside the stone.
Think of the man who sits alone
trying to will himself into a stillness where

God goes belonging. To every riven thing he's made
there is given one shade
shaped exactly to the thing itself:
under the tree a darker tree;
under the man the only man to see

God goes belonging to every riven thing. He's made
the things that bring him near,
made the mind that makes him go.
A part of what man knows,
apart from what man knows,

God goes belonging to every riven thing he's made.