Research Article

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The Poetry of Ordinary Language

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Abstract: The general argument of this essay is that poetry is an everyday ambition and an everyday accomplishment. The evidence for this – a good bit of which I will amass enthusiastically in what follows – is everywhere in our language. I explore this according to three guiding intuitions: (i) people, at least some of the time, want to give their words a similar intensity or fullness and show the same skill in unleashing verbal power, as poets do – seeking words that will carry their voices; (ii) people say things give me the same aesthetic bliss and ache of gratitude that poetry gives me; and (iii) there seems to be a poetic or aesthetic dimension to all of language, without which words would not have the significance for us that they do. I end the essay by saying why the poetry in our everyday speech complicates the relation between the ordinary and (different versions of) the extraordinary as other philosophers have imagined it.

Keywords: intensity, poetry, everyday language, ordinary life, voice, relish, aesthetics, creation, culture

1 Introduction

The general argument of this essay is that poetry is an everyday ambition and an everyday accomplishment. The evidence for this – a good bit of which I will amass enthusiastically in what follows – is everywhere in our language. Anyone who looks curiously into the variety of our daily speech, will find, in amongst the chatter, instances of verbal flair, metaphoric invention and even single words which seem to have been crafted and crafted again over years of interest and attention – all the anonymous creations of those other human beings who came before us. Poetry, born in moments of expressive rapture, where we feel an intense need for a more explosive or exquisite language, is as much a part of us as our bodies or time. Think of all those words with similar but subtly different meanings, like "enchanted," "entranced," "dazzled," "mesmerised," "struck dumb," "ensorcelled," "bewitched," etc. – with their varieties of tint and shades of sense! They attest to a desire for sharp distinctions, a hunger for the perfect word, and an almost maternal care for our experiences, which we nourish and raise within language. We find "portmanteau words" in our language, too, phrases which, although their literal meanings remain near to nonsense, usage has endowed with vividness and given a place in our lives. Think of "fusspot" or "nutjob" or "jobsworth" or the "hair-brained" in "hairbrained scheme"; or "manhandle" or "cheapskate" or "nitwit." Our everyday language is also full of astonishing metaphors which are now said as casually as prepositions. Think of how calling someone "a doormat" conveys his sad passivity, living as the thing people don't see as they come in through the door on their way to something else. Or think of how we tell someone to "pipe down" when he's getting a bit lairy, because pipes, when blown into zealously, do not make a bold sound but only squeak. Some other of my favourite examples are "He'll knock you into the middle of next week!"; "I've been run off my feet"; "You took the words right out of my mouth"; "It's a foolproof plan," etc. The point is not just that dead metaphorical expressions are embedded in our language, structuring it, albeit whilst remaining half asleep; it is that our language is full of expressions that *remain* poetic, as if poetry were an irreducible element of many of our everyday aspirations. Poetry's intensification of language corresponds to

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our desire for an intensified life or a new calibre of intimacy with our fellow human beings. These verbal feats enhance our experiences. The evidence of this in our ordinary talk is evidence of the ordinariness, or naturalness, of this ambition. Finding a biting phrase, a ludic metaphor, or the words to kick your speech into a gallop – these are everyday ecstasies.

So, the general thesis of the essay is: ordinary language is rich with poetry and traces of poetic ambition. I explore this in relation to three guiding intuitions: (i) Some of the things people say give me the same aesthetic bliss and ache of gratitude that poetry gives me; (ii) people, at least some of the time, want to give their words a similar intensity or fullness, and show the same skill in unleashing verbal power, as poets do – seeking words that will carry their voices; and (iii) there seems to be a poetic or aesthetic dimension to *all* of language, without which words would not have the significance for us that they do. So (i) poetic creations fill our language, and our daily world; (ii) the ambition to get our *voices* into our speech is a feature of everyday life; (iii) all words have a poetic *quality*, a specific texture, sound, character, etc., which makes us cherish them as aesthetic objects and, I will argue, even as works. I look at these points one by one and then end the essay by saying why the poetry in our everyday speech complicates the relation between the ordinary and (different versions of) the extraordinary as other philosophers have imagined it.

2 Terminology

First, though, I will try to say something about what I mean by "poetry" and what I mean by "ordinary," so as to give structure and depth to what follows.

It is hard to sum up poetry in a single paragraph. But I will do my best to say what I think it is, first by acknowledging two enigmatic characteristics of perhaps all poetry: (i) the importance to us of lines of poetry – that they strike deep, like uncanny events in the soul; (ii) that this importance, the spiritual impact of poetry, is inseparable from its verbal form. My answers to why poetry has these characteristics are roughly these: (i) poetry is important because it transfigures into words obscure but intense experiences for which we seem to have no words – even if, as sometimes happens, these experiences are actually arrived at through the process of writing itself; (ii) in poetry, the wordless experience enters language and seems almost to revive language itself out of the deadness of our neglect, as if we suddenly remembered what it could do. Look at a line of poetry, all these words, usually tired and blunted, fogged in vagueness, suddenly seem to be awake again, sharpened into focus and reverberating with life. There are as many versions of this accomplishment as there are poems. Some allow a voice of anguish to enter ordinary words, making language carry a burden of inexpressible feeling, like the outcry at the end of Louise Glück's "Mock Orange": "How can I rest?/How can I be content/when there is still/that odor in the world?"[1] The word "odor" in that poem has absorbed into it a nagging, unspeakable mortal weight, which clogs the speaker's throat. Another poem makes us feel many contradictory feelings rush together, like the euphoric spite of Hamlet's speech to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern where he invites them to play upon his pipe, with the triumphant segue, "It is as easy as lying," in which his contempt for his old school friends and his joy in rhetoric's power to mete out careful judgement combine in the line's exhilarated pitch.[2] Other poems reveal a connection between verbal sound and strange hints of meaning, like in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," where T. S. Eliot makes us hear an overrefined timidity in the sound of the word "peach," as Prufrock primly pronounces it: "Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?/I shall wear white flannel trousers and walk upon the beach, etc." It is like the sound of someone almost asking for what he might perhaps want. Another poem might remind us of language's power to crystallise an observation, or of the weight of influence that even casual words can have in a sentence, both of which are achieved in this, from W. H. Auden's "*Musée des Beaux Arts*": "They [the Old Masters] never forgot/That even the dreadful

1 Glück, "Mock Orange."
2 Shakespeare, *Hamlet*.

martyrdom must run its course/Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot/Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse/Scratches its innocent behind on a tree."[3] In poetry, something moves us with a power like a description of our fate; but what moves us, what we are fated to, is somehow tied to exactly these words. To speak allegorically, it is as though, at the heart of poetic creation, we found a speechlessness which causes a rupture with language as it stands and then an achievement whereby this speechlessness, like a silence with its own palpable form, is worked into language, assuming a body of words. My overall point in this essay, then, is that there are achievements like this to be found in our ordinary, everyday language.

In his book, *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary*, Stanley Rosen makes a point which might be mistaken for the one I am making: "the boundary between poetry and ordinary language is entirely unclear; in addition, one could claim that ordinary language is essentially poetic because it employs all the figures of speech that are to be found in poetry, and we constantly use it in inventing new expressions."[4] Rosen seems to be saying: we have ordinary language on the one hand and poetry on the other and we can note certain likenesses between them – even if he wants to say that the boundaries separating them are unclear. At work here, I think, is a sense of poetry as something already categorised – poetry as a literary genre. Poetry is the set of all the *poems* that exist. That is not my understanding of it. "Poetry" may often be used as a categorising term – as it is in bookshops or on course curriculums. In such places, the term picks out those verbal creations that take the form of verse. But my problem with this use is that it doesn't make room for our hesitation about *calling* some poems poetry. We often want to say, "What – that rubbish? That's not poetry!" However many tropes you name – repetition, rhythm, emphasis, metaphor, rhyme, etc. – will never *by themselves* add up to poetry. And often poetry can do without any of them or make up a new one of its own. For this reason, I take as my guide another common use of the word "poetry" as a *superlative*. Louise Glück writes, "[poet] names an aspiration, not an occupation: in other words, not a noun for a passport."[5] It is the same with poetry: it is not a categorising term, but an intense experience in language. Think of that cliché which pops up now and then in football, after a nice passing move is topped off by a clinical finish, and the commentator says, astonished: "Poetry in motion." "Poetry" here is a celebratory term. This sheds light, I think, on what poetry actually is: a verbal triumph, a sweet strike of language. "Poetry" means something similar to "This writing sings." It is not a neutral category: praise is part of the point of it. We could correct Rosen and say: *poems* and ordinary language employ the same rhetorical figures, etc. But this now seems trivial when "poems" merely name a category of writing. I wouldn't feel it as a cause for excitement if I found out that my speech resembled a bad poem. We only care about this resemblance because poetry is a form of splendour. When Rosen says that it is almost impossible to draw the distinction between ordinary language and poetic language, he should have said: it is impossible to say what is the true home of poetry, ordinary language, or what we call poems.

I want to say one thing in addition to this. The identification of poetry with poems is based on two restrictive assumptions: (i) that poetry is written; (ii) that, in each realisation, the poetry is in some way self-sufficient, standing apart from daily life. But (in response to (i)), as everybody knows or remembers when they are reminded, poetry has a long oral prehistory, with many branches: religious speech, communal storytelling, and proverbs, to name a few. Poetry at this time (which, even now, has not ended) had many ways of making an appearance in daily life. My own examples exist in this oral, heterogeneous tradition. These remarks go with (ii). We imagine that a poem, alone on its bit of white page, exists in separation from the world, a sublime singularity. Or it lives together with other poems, but away from everything else, on the Olympus of literary tradition.[6] But every poem is a response to what the poet has had to live through, made out of a language which has been inhabited by millennia of human beings. The poetry's environment, as with a bit of repartee or an insult, is human life, our mortal situation, even if the poet lives her own version of this life. Poems are not the exclusive representatives of poetry; and, I think, they do not always

3 Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock;" Auden, "Musée des Beaux Art."

4 Rosen, *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary*, 292.

5 Glück, *Proofs and Theories*, accessed as an eBook.

6 See, for example, Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*.

provide us with a paradigm example of what poetry is. It is what fiery moments of speech and great poems have in common that interests me.

I want to make one complementary point about the word "ordinary" in my title, even though I will look at this concept more carefully in Section 3. I intend to preserve the sense of "ordinary" as "plain, unexceptional, average." There is often contempt and dismissal in our use of the word – this is the use I intend to evoke. "The play was ordinary" means that it wasn't that great. The ordinary disappoints me or leaves me underwhelmed. "Ordinary" is pejorative in a way symmetrical to that in which "poetry" is superlative. My title embraces this paradox. What it means is that precisely in the stuff which we dismiss as mediocre and uninteresting – just like the friend whom we underestimate because he is our friend – there is a quality of genius which, if only we could breathe into it the life of our attention, would shock us with its rich significance. As many philosophers have already expressed it, what is ordinary often reveals itself as something so habitual or familiar that it is now difficult for us to see it or appreciate its beauties.[7] It is the life you have got used to not noticing. The great events of our existence, those that end up really making a difference, are often met with a shrug at the time of their occurrence or happen whilst we are looking the other way. Stanley Cavell gives this dimension of life various names: "the everyday," "the unremarkable," "the uneventful," etc. The ordinary is whatever, to our peril, we have allowed to become merely ordinary. What I hope is that, in the usual sulk of daily life, where we are often deadened to our own experiences, the examples I accumulate here will snap us out of our lassitude and make us see the extraordinary in the ordinary, realising how wealthy we are with all this poetry around us.

Some visions of the ordinary, as broad as they are, take away much of what we might mean by the word "ordinary." But "ordinary language" can refer to *many* things. We could say that "passionate," for example, is a more ordinary word than "amorous," which hits a register of rhapsody or makes us put on a theatrical voice. Or listen to this piece of advice I once heard that has the air of a joke: "Don't say mad; say mentally deficient." The point of this, I guess, was to encourage me to sterilise my speech with a medical term before entering into dodgy territory: the ordinary, like a mob, is less predictable in its implications than the technical. Sometimes, the sense of the word "ordinary" can be usefully narrowed, as when we compare "ordinary" words with "literary" ones.[8] This distinction is useful when we are learning a foreign language and we want a rough sense of how a word might *sound* when we use it. It makes perfect sense to tell somebody, "No, don't say to a bunch of 11-year-old kids, when analysing their last football match, 'your position was indeterminate' or 'you were lost in the vicissitudes of the game': that's too literary. Say 'you were all over the place' or 'you had your head in the clouds'" etc. Many of the phrases, words, and poetic achievements I am going to discuss in what follows have precisely this ordinary sound, which I think of as the sound of being lived in, or the sound of other people's voices channelled into my own.

3 Poetry as an Everyday Ambition

We speak not only for utilitarian reasons, like shouting for help or conducting business meetings; nor only also for therapeutic reasons, like seeking consolation or letting off steam – but, amongst many other prompts for speech, to excite aesthetic bliss or a troubling rapture in other people or to experience this vulnerability ourselves. What we say often has an intensity or fullness in excess of all utility, and this is precisely what we search for: we are savouring, relishing our words, and what they do to us. I talk of a feeling of "suicidal happiness" or "the nagging ulcer of grief" or I say that my memory of a certain woman is "like a mole that churns up my sleep" – an excess of sorrow or merriness blazes into rhetoric. We speak in

7 See, for example, Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary;" and also Fasula and Laugier, *Concepts de l'ordinaire*.

8 I oppose this, in some way, to what Moi says in her book, *The Revolution of the Ordinary* (210–3): that there is no such thing as literary language. I am reluctant to take her on directly, though, because she expresses hesitation at various points about her use of the term "ordinary language," and so her commitment to the phrase is unclear to me.

this way to one another, or try to, recurrently. This ambition, I think, is like that of the poet seeking a language that bristles or bites. Poetry is not a passion found on other planets, but one as ordinary as jokes and uncertainty.

I say that these instances of verbal invention are poetry, and not merely poetic, because they are not–like the poetic–parasitic on a preconceived idea of what poetry is: they expand our idea of what is to count as poetry, and our ideas about what poetry can do for us–about want we want rhetorical virtuosity to achieve. They have a splendor and vitality which show that our everyday speech–our chats, discussions and throwaway lines–can be, at their best, vehicles of human expansion. I will now look at several forms of this verbal ambition.

3.1 Poetic Creation

The ambition to condense language to give a joke more sting; to find a metaphor extravagant enough to make a hard thought receivable; to choose the words and images that will let me hit the right pitch of gentleness or of defiance: whether these aspirations are sought in themselves or as part of larger plans – like apology or communication or seduction – everybody has felt the necessity of such things: we come to life in search of powerful expressions. Finding a delicious word, a suppler rhythm, or hitting exactly the right note, these things matter to us like the health of our souls. It is by inhabiting this sense of necessity, and expressing ourselves accordingly, not by doing arts-and-crafts or writing Sunday poems, that we live as poets.

Many of these poetic achievements are discoverable in our language itself, as ordinary to us as basic words. Just as lines from Shakespeare's plays – "It's all Greek to me"; "he wears his heart upon his sleeve"; "the be-all and the end-all" – or phrases adapted from mythology – "Oedipal complex"; "Herculean task"; "Promethean venture"; "opening Pandora's box" etc. – have become parts of what we inherit *as* language, so the creations of the anonymous poets of everyday speech are also parts of our verbal inheritance – those people who once wove together little masterpieces like "she'll talk the head off your shoulders"; "I bent over backwards to help you"; "It goes in one ear and out the other"; "One step forwards and two steps back"; etc. The ordinariness of all of these phrases – as well as others I have quoted above – consists in the fact that we learn them with or *as* language. We absorb them as part of the forms of life common to those we grew up with. But they are also extraordinary in their imaginativeness, in the graceful way they transfigure an elusive experience – like exasperation or failure or generosity – into a vivid symbolic expression, a laconic vignette. If you try to imagine the moment of their creation, the mental tumult of intelligence which produced them, you get a disarming sense of their genius. Some people may not know these particular expressions, but they will have others that they have absorbed in the same way, as casually as slang or proverbs. They are the words that allow one's voice to join the chorus of the community. But they are also evidence of the community's aspiration to culture, to a more intense mental life, a more finessed or amplified appreciation of the world. They are, like philosophy or the poetry we read in books, attempts by a community to cultivate itself, to enhance its consciousness of life. The expressions then remain with us for their spiritual usefulness, as handy for the soul as shoes are for the feet. Proust makes a similar observation in the second volume of *In Search of Lost Time*: "The state I was in is described perfectly by a fine colloquialism – *I didn't know whether I was coming or going!* – the coiner of which is as unknown as the author of the greatest epic poems, but which, like them, and *pace* the theory of Wolf, must have had an originator, one of those modest creative spirits who turn up every now and then to enrich the rest of us with a felicitous expression like 'putting a name to a face', but whose face we can never put a name to."[9] Many examples of poetry – from the big names and the nameless – live on in our language. They are deep observations given verbal form, as quiet now as habits or reflexes in the way they organise our experiences and enrich our visions of life.

9 Proust, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*.

This is a different point from the one made, for example, by Lakoff and Johnson when they say that our language is deeply structured by metaphor[10]: the phrases I have quoted above, even when we are deaf to them, *remain* poetic, as if ceaselessly calling for an appreciation of their imaginativeness. Sedimented or dead metaphors do not do this, even if we might in some way benefit from rehabilitating their original meanings. There is a difference between something being dead and *us* being dead to it. "Conceive" in the sense of "to conceive of something" no longer has a strong relation to biological conception. We might even misunderstand the phrase if we interpreted it like that, thinking that to conceive of something I had to be the one to *invent* it. But to really imagine someone "up in arms" or "chickening out," it helps to return to the phrase's primal scene, the image in the mind of its inventor, to see my friend arming himself for battle or squawking off like a chicken. In the case of this silenced poetry, it is only insensitivity that makes us miss what is still blatantly there.

The compact significance of phrases like these makes them kinds of poetry. But it is not just that they communicate meaning, like any kind of discourse: they *embody* it, too, like gestures. We want them to live on in our language *exactly as they are*. I have many examples of expressions like this which have stuck in my head, picked up from daily conversations, landmarks in my own life: "He's so old his flesh is half compost." Or, about someone's stubbornness: "You might as well try to talk your blisters off your feet." Or "No one can teach Jim the concept of personal space. He stands as if he were trying to smell the breakfast on you." Or of someone's avarice: "He can't understand anything unless you translate it into pounds." Or, for a courtlier example: "It's the kind of entertainment that makes you long for the return of boredom." My aunt, when she was moving house, exhausted by the strain, said: "Lord, deliver me from this upheaval." Or as someone once said to me about his kid: "When he looks at me and laughs, it's like I've been forgiven for everything." I feel in these outbursts a mental power like that I find in the replies of Falstaff, trying to get out of a tight spot: "If reasons were as plentiful as blackberries, I would not give one upon compulsion," as he says to Prince Harry, who is pressing him for reasons he hasn't yet had time to concoct.[11] Poetry is an accomplishment in language in which to focus on what is expressed is at the same time to focus on exactly *this* expression. Poetry transfigures – yes; but, at the same time, it *is* the accomplished transfiguration. The experience or recognition, or our own feeling about something, is too dark for us or too immense; language makes it surveyable and condenses the darkness into light. What justifies me in calling these examples poetry is that they possess the quality that makes me call anything poetry – spiritual impact based on verbal form.

I also get this feeling of enthusiasm when I remember, for example, the phrases I have absorbed from the world of football. Some of my favourites are descriptions of incompetence: "he's got two left feet" or "he's got the touch of a rapist," or to say that someone "hoofed the ball," as if clumsiness, too, had its sublime forms and the hopeless also deserved panegyrics. There are others that are more straightforwardly celebratory, but still subtle and niftily inventive. To say of a smart dribbler that "he turned the other bloke inside out," or "ran rings around the defence" or that a speedy winger "gobbled up the space in front of him" or of a wise old centre-back to declare that "he's got the striker in his back pocket" – these are also intense transfigurations of language. I also love the suggestion that you can *ping* a pass or that when someone really whacks the ball he *creams* it, or the mythologisation of a clever striker as a *goal-poacher*. These uses of language are ordinary in the sense that they belong to everyone who lives in that place – the land of football – absorbed like part of the local dialect. But they are also extraordinary, in their wit and in their passionate observations. A player was so fast, skilful, or useless that mere adjectives were not enough: the spectator needed something more emphatic or individuated to convey his or her delight. "You can't afford to blink when he's got the ball," or, alternatively, of the less successful striker: "He couldn't even put the ball into his own net." These phrases act on me like hopes. I think to myself, "Human beings are creatures who bothered to be that imaginative *here*!" They were not content only to watch a football match and be temporarily entertained, but wanted to build monuments to their acutest perceptions, become rhetoricians of the game. These phrases are like the heads, alert and expressive, that we see crafted on medieval churches, once chiselled into liveliness by individual stonemasons, each according to his own

10 See Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.
11 Shakespeare, *Henry IV, 1 and 2*.

rough talents. We could think of it as local poetry, and there is much more of it, both in the world of football and in other small worlds, too, so that coming upon one of these regions of language is like walking around in a town in Italy or Spain, where you take a few unpromising turns, go down a dead-end or an alley leading nowhere in particular, and the sight that hits you, springing into view, is one of ravishing beauty.

Brett Bourbon, in his book *Everyday Poetics*, draws a similar connection between poetry and transfigured experience. The source of poetry, he says, is an experience of *form* as something of great spiritual importance: "By form, I mean those aspects of words, events, and experiences, for example, that can only be made visible and understood by means of analogy: not the shape of a shoulder, but its feel; not the meter of a poem, but the pattern of our experience; not the measure of an earthquake, but its significance … This does not make the form subjective, but rather an intersubjective mode of revelation and consequence […]." And he quotes the following passage from Agnon's novel, *A Guest for the Night*: "It takes an ordinary man a half hour to walk to the centre of town; carrying baggage, it takes a quarter of an hour more. I took an hour and a half: every house, every ruin, every heap of rubbish caught my eye and held me." Then, Bourbon says, "These houses, ruins, and heaps are not poems made; they are not constructed artworks. Nor are they epiphanic revelations. … They are events of form that happen to the narrator as he walks. … To inhabit such a poetic vulnerability constitutes an ethical discovery and accomplishment."[12] Poetry comes out of an experience of form, when I am hit hard by the elusive importance of the aesthetic character of a thing. The experience sends me into a state of quivering speechlessness, a throbbing silence, my reaction at first only a kind of rustling in the blood, a simmering, my mind quiet in a moment of compacted tension before the gradual release of creation. The relation between this experience and poetry is captured in that word "analogy." Since my experience cannot be related literally, it *requires* poetry.

My view differs from Bourbon's, though, because I don't think that poetic experiences could *explain* what makes a poem, or anything, poetry. The word "poetic" in his use of it seems parasitic on the term "poetry" it is supposed to define. Bourbon doesn't seem to be worried about this. He really wants to talk about poetic experiences. The circularity Bourbon plays with, though, leaves no room for distinctions between poetry and things like beauty, splendour, art, sublimity, astonishment, love, etc. In some way, this is an advantage: they *do* go together. In another, it seems evasive if what you want to do is talk about poetry in particular. I want to describe the relation between *language* and these experiences of wonder or devastation. Poetry is an art of words. I want to know why some combinations of words arrest me like the voices of fate. This *verbal* aspect isn't captured by imagining, as Bourbon does, an experience like the feel of a shoulder or the significance of an earthquake: I might fail, as a poet, to *capture* such things. Poetry *succeeds* in finding a verbal analogy for an obscure intense experience.

I like Bourbon's talk, though, of the need to cultivate "poetic vulnerability," related to the vulnerability that makes us fall in love, an exposure to the world's claims on us. The poem wounds us in its own special way; its reality is this wound: woundedness is the condition of perception. Our poetic vulnerability is our fatedness to language, the ways it gives a body to our experiences and makes them live, and the way it opens up dimensions of experience as yet uncharted. This is what ordinary phrases like "we no longer see eye to eye" or "you need to take your mind off things" or "my memory is playing tricks on me" accomplish: they give a form to deeply enigmatic experiences – in these cases, lost intimacy, relaxation, and forgetfulness. You have to think of what it would have been like to be the first person to think of them. That person has given us this part of ourselves.

3.2 Voice

We all know those moments when our hearts were not in what we said, when our words sounded false, like smiles of fake politeness, or we for some reason failed to get ourselves into our speech. We might have been

12 Bourbon, *Everyday Poetics*, 7.

talking just for the sake of it or turning the conversation, knowingly or not, into a vehicle for strategy; whatever the reason, we did not really *mean* what we were saying. Our minds were elsewhere. When we really say what we mean, on the other hand, we often have the feeling that our voice has filled our words, like a flush of health, or as if we had interpreted the score of an important thought like a virtuoso; chatter and strategy, on the other hand, rob us of our voices. This is a distinction we all recognise, and we have all suffered by falling on the wrong side of it, in the form of either agonised silence or euphoric secrecy. Stanley Cavell's desire, as he expresses it in *Little Did I Know*, "to write philosophy and mean everything I said," traverses this anxiety.[13] We want to be *present* in our thinking, for our speech to have its source in a deep feeling or a deep commitment. This is why the suppression of the voice, or its loss, can feel like the loss of life itself.

Brett Bourbon makes a point about reading poetry, but in words that are also relevant to what I want to say here: "This sense of meaningfulness (as opposed to propositional content or meaning) is cognate with how the human face is meaningful, not simply as human, but when we see (and how we see) the faces of those we love."[14] When we speak meaningfully, in Bourbon's image, we come out from under the veil of vagueness and *show our face* in language. We do not always know what this face looks like to other people. But we know the difference between times when we have adopted the fake smile, like an inner wince, and then those times when we have been rescued by an embarrassed visible happiness or our thoughts have otherwise flooded our expressions. To have a voice or not, to have a face or not, are ways of talking about the difference between being alive and being dead.

The search for a voice is both a moral metaphor (for finding my way in life, or for making an appearance in the world) and a literal goal, cultivated as I listen to, or overhear, myself speak, developing an ear for my evasions. But sometimes, in the work of Bourbon, for example, and even in Cavell's philosophy, there is not much mention of the voice's physical character, its sonority: it becomes an abstraction again, an allegoric term for attainable individuality or presence. This is unfortunate because it is often through the voice's irreducibly aesthetic qualities that I perceive its character and vitality. Whether I am expressive or a victim of ventriloquy is something I can often *hear*. It often seems to me that authenticity and charlatanism have their own distinct sets of sounds. Timbre, rhythm, tone, and pitch are textured with thoughts and passions. We say a voice is "flat," or "tinny" or "toneless" or "panicked" or "thin" – or even "false" – or that it is "resonant," "warm," or "full of crackle and bite" or "true" – like a strike that is true, hitting the ball in its magic centre. Variations in tone have elusive moral consequences, like variations in music. We all have an ear or nose for this, almost a sixth-sense, however much we try to hide from our ability, as if we were bloodhounds of human falseness.

This quest for a voice, then, can also be understood in its aesthetic aspects. Sometimes, I hear in someone's pronunciation of a word, for example, the extent to which she has made it her own. She has practised on it, lived in it, and thought under its influence; now, she really knows how to say it. You cannot just do this, off the bat; it takes time for voice and word to become one. Some people say "grotesque," and it sounds affected, tacky, merely vaudeville; but a woman sitting next to me at the theatre the other night said it as if her whole ragged heart had been coughed up with the word: it came out reluctantly, a growl from the soul. This experience was like that Louise Glück describes as the encounter with a poet's voice: "A chilling word, literature. It gives no sense of the voice's adamant vitality, preferring to treat the poem as a distilled thing, inert and distant. Whereas the voice that rises from the page is weirdly restless: seductive, demanding, embittered, witty. Speaking not from the past but the present. And it still happens: voices emerge from which, in Jeffers' phrase, fire cannot be leeched … It would be interesting to know something about that quality, because the poem, no matter how charged its content, will not survive on content but through voice."[15] Experiences of voicelessness and finding a voice, of hearing myself droning on, and of feeling my words full of "adamant vitality," or "weirdly restless," are something we experience outside of poetry, too. Some speeches

13 Cavell, *Little Did I Know*.

14 Bourbon, *Everyday Poetics*, 35.

15 Glück, *Proofs and Theories*.

come out of us like the true course of a river, others like a stampede from the heart. At other times, a few words acquire a still, quiet intensity. Some phrases, spoken between men in a café when there is nothing else to do or by someone sighing to someone else on the bus, seem tender with years of suffering, like soft creases on a face. Speaking is a form of coming to life, or failing to; an aesthetics of the voice gives us a sketch of what kind of life it is.

Learning to say a word is not just about learning its meaning and its range of applications. *Knowledge* is not enough. You must also learn how to *speak* the word. Even if I know all there is to know about it, I might still, after all my learning, not be able to give the word the right *sound*. I have not lived with it, or in it, enough. I remember, when I first came to university, briefly trying and failing to integrate the word "droll" into my vocabulary, which had seemed to me a classy word when one of my teachers had used it. I couldn't get my voice into the word. It wasn't for me. In a similar way, I say to my kids "alright, geezer" sometimes as a sort of joke, or when in theatrical high-spirits, sometimes gently, tenderly; but if I went back to the place where I grew up and met a real geezer, I would not say to him, "Alright, geezer," as many geezers do, because I know that, if I spoke it in my own voice to him, it would sound all wrong. When I speak to my children, I share with them this private part of myself, the little bit of Beckenham that has travelled with me; but if I did that to a geezer, I would only be deceiving him – he would think that I am more Beckenham than I really am. In sociolinguistics, this phenomenon is studied in relation to group dynamics, not in relation to personal style or personal ethics. My use or misuse of a word, though, is not always a matter of status: it is often a matter of character or even simply of theatrical range, my personal repertoire of intonations – that is to say, it is an aesthetic matter. There are some words that are mine because I can say them in the right tone of voice, although many others will never be able to do this.

For some words, like "carburettor," this is perhaps less true. But I can still imagine a mechanic smiling at my use of it, as if he were thinking to himself, "What has *he* got to do with carburettors!" Perhaps, I say it almost as if I were asking a question. A taxi driver may feel as repulsed by someone's chatter about "the traffic" as I would be if someone who had only spent one day in the town where I grew up started pontificating about the "social-dynamics" there like an expert. In his essay, "A Profession of Literary Faith," Jorge Luis Borges writes, "I believe words must be conquered, lived, and that the apparent publicity they receive from the dictionary is a falsehood. Nobody should dare to write 'outskirts' without having spent hours pacing their high sidewalks; without having desired and suffered there as if they were a lover; without having felt their walls, their lots, their moons just around the corner from a general store, like a cornucopia... I have now conquered my poverty, recognising among thousands the nine or ten words that get along with my soul."[16] We wear words in, like shoes; some come to fit us so snugly that we will continue to walk in them for the rest of our lives.

What I have said so far has made it seem like our voices must find their way into the language from the outside, latecomers to human expressivity. That is sometimes how it is, as when we want to learn how to say a word. But our voices are also at the origins of language: they are amongst the elemental forces that language civilises. Screaming, shouting, gasping, retching, howling, and crying, and also cooing, murmuring, humming, sighing, and purring are like primal forms of speech. Kissing, another gentleness of the lips, is a kind of wordless speaking. The way in which people have different laughs, to name another kind of wordless expressiveness, is very like the way in which they have different voices – both are signature sounds that seem to reveal something deep and enigmatic about who a person is; both are sources of deep attraction and aversion. In pronunciation, the voice enters a word that is already a part of language; but the voice, in its primal form, also *creates* language. It expresses our interest in speaking, the neediness that language stills into a more sociable form. We speak only when we resist the desire, say, to scream or retch; but if that desire does not crackle in our speech, we will have failed to express ourselves. This can be seen in the way a community gets fascinated by a particular region of life, convulsing into verbal activity and producing hundreds of words and expressions there, like eulogies. These are like little religious festivals alive in our language. In England, for example, we have loads of everyday words for dampness or dirtiness

16 Borges, "A Profession of Literary Faith," 26–7.

that we use metaphorically to express disgust or criticism. “Sloppy,” “sleazy,” “scummy,” “grimy,” “tatty,” “dingy,” “squalid,” “grotty,” “rank” – and none are particularly odd or rare. Even “damp,” “moist,” and “wet” are slang terms for something meagre or pitiful. This vocabulary, though, in its carnivalesque multiplicity, attests to a passion for seediness, etc. Whereas calling something “tawdry” or “sordid” puts me above what I am talking about, to say the above words, or “foul” or “nasty,” is to get in amongst the muck, to enjoy your disgust, almost to be grateful for what has disgusted you. You hear in these words the satisfaction of a speaking voice – the marrow-deep jubilance of speech. “Tawdry” and “sordid” are spoken with the teeth; “scummy” comes from the gut. The conversion of eros or emotional turbulence, through the voice, into these cherishable words makes me want to say that this lyrical vocabulary is itself an instance of poetry – a kind of ur-poem.[17]

4 The Poetic Quality of Words

We can also see poetry in ordinary language, not just in a host of verbal accomplishments, but also as a particular aspect of *all* of language. All words have an aesthetic dimension, their own particular power and beauty, which poetry awakens in its use of them. Rhyme is one example, reminding us of the sonority of words. Alliteration does something similar. But it is also an accomplishment of poetry to show us how much the texture or resonance of a word can *matter* to us – and, therefore, that words do in fact possess a significant texture or resonance. “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,/Creeps in this petty pace from day to day/Till the last syllable of recorded time” etc.,[18] where the alliteration of “petty pace” has the quality like that of white spit: the “p’s” are not plump and moist but suggest a dry mouth, a dehydrated soul: not even Macbeth’s contempt has vital force anymore. This care for the sounds of our words is also something we find in everyday speech, where we relish the taste of a word on our tongues, its harshness or softness on our lips and teeth. Think of saying the word “squalid” in “He was a little man with a squalid mind” or the word “prat” or “lull” or “vapid.” The tone of voice in which we speak them – the bite or caress of utterance – is *part of* the word.

Some words call on me as if they had the same logical structure that Richard Moran ascribes to beauty.[19] They make an appeal, and I am put under an obligation *to them*. They teach me how they are to be said. It is characteristic of this experience of beauty, in Moran’s account, that I will hate myself for my failure to live up to the demands of the beautiful object or, in this case, the word. My disappointment, as Moran puts it, is with *myself*, for my own lack of imagination or for my insufficiency of response. There are some words – like “tenderness,” or “merriness,” or “finesse” – which seem like the emblems of a higher form of life, or abbreviated visions of human possibility, and I want to live up to the visions I see in them. They are like the leading words of a religion – as powerful in their own ways as “fate” or “redemption.” To feel words in this way, to feel *the weight of their claim on me*, reveals a deep sensitivity to language. But my response, in these cases, is mostly still a moral one. In other cases, however, my response is both moral and distinctly *aesthetic*. What the word means is inseparable from its aesthetic character, which I experience in the way the word conditions or exhilarates my voice. It places on me a demand for performance. When I pronounce the word “scorn,” for example, I seem to make a symbolic cutting sound at the back of my throat, like the lash of scorn itself. When I say “fatuous,” the “at” has a short bitter snap to it – like a snort. The “ff” sound in “naff” expresses the disappointing weakness of what I have experienced – like foam instead of drink – just as the “ff” in “faffing” refers comically to the lack of importance in what you are doing. Certain feeble

17 In *Everyday Poetics* (see Chapter 1, “Poems of the Everyday”), Brett Bourbon says that the phrase “I love you” and the alphabet are kinds of “primal poems.” I think that anyone sufficiently interested will be able to note the similarities and differences between the two of us. It would have taken me too long to go into them here.

18 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, accessed via Shakespeare.mit.edu.

19 Moran, “Kant, Proust and the Appeal of Beauty,” 61–87.

laughs sound like that "ff." These words make a claim on me, then, by way of their sensuous qualities: I respond by bringing out their depths of sound. It is as if onomatopoeia were not a quality of some words, but a secret longing that animates the whole of language, nearly achieved here and there in a few of its more expressive moments.

Sometimes, tone and sound are so dominant in what we say that words take on a strange aesthetic power whilst completely losing their ordinary meanings: think of the difference between "he loves himself" and "he loves himself *off*." In the second, "off" abandons its meaning (off what?) and becomes pure verbal succulence, like a vocal equivalent of the man's own juicy narcissism. But "off," a word made powerful precisely by the enigmatic nature of its appearance here, allowing it to act as an intensifier, also conjures up madness, as in "off his head," and sexual voracity, as in "she sucked him off," where the "off" is a sign of pure exuberance, or the hope for it. The saying precedes, guides, the said. We could say: the *enjoyment* of this apparently meaningless or gratuitous bit of language brings home to us the fact that all speech is action, alive in its performance. These sounds are the gestures of language.

This quality I am talking about is not well described by talking of the difference between what a word refers to and what it implies – that is to say, between denotation and connotation. It is a difference, not of implication, but of aesthetic character. What we want to understand is the particular relish we feel in using a word, which drives our use of it. The distinction between connotation and denotation is intellectual. Denotation is what the word refers to; connotation is what the word brings to mind, or its social effect. But our concern for the texture of the word, its voice or sound, involves us in an erotic relation to language, or to one another through language, a submission to its force, requiring a phenomenology of pleasure. It is about the experience of savouring the word as we speak it and the verbal *materiality* that is savoured.

Seeing words aesthetically, for a different view on this, might be thought of as a bit like seeing a bowl of fruit as a visual feast of shadow, colour and pimples of decay, or like noticing the ridges and cavities that grief has riven into someone's face. In "The Aesthetic Experience of Artworks and Everyday Scenes," Bence Nanay, making a point about art's effect on everyday scenes, says something similar, quoting the following passage from Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*:

> Since I had seen such things depicted in water-colours by Elstir, I sought to find again in reality, I cherished, as though for their poetic beauty, the broken gestures of the knives still lying across one another, the swollen convexity of a discarded napkin upon which the sun would patch a scrap of yellow velvet, … the shifting colour of the plums which passed from green to blue and from blue to golden yellow in the half-plundered dish, the chairs, like a group of old ladies, that came twice daily to take their places round the white cloth spread on the table as on an altar at which were celebrated the rites of the palate, where in the hollows of oyster-shells a few drops of lustral water had gathered as in tiny holy water stoups of stone; I tried to find beauty there where I had never imagined before that it could exist, in the most ordinary things, in the profundities of 'still life'.[20]

For Nanay, this is an example of the way art can teach us to appreciate the beauty, or aesthetic richness, of everyday objects. This is like my idea that poets unleash the aesthetic power of ordinary words and show us what they are, their crackle or their quietness, their shadowy menace or their reserve of beauty. This comment appears in Nanay's essay as part of a wider argument: Art teaches us how to appreciate the aesthetic character of everyday objects by modelling a specific way of allocating our attention, their style remaking our world, bringing visionary refreshment, like a new principle of reality. This is an interesting idea and similar to the one I am exploring, but it is not exactly the same. My point is not only that we *can* see our language in this way, as is the case with the bowl of fruit transformed into a still-life: my point is that we *do* see it in this way, all of us, and on a daily basis. More than that: our language is in fact constituted as something we see in this way: our words are, in that allegory, not the bowl of fruit, but like thousands of artists' paintings condensed. They are not only open to aesthetic appreciation; aesthetic appreciation went into their making and continues to go into their ceaseless remaking. I am not inviting people to see the

20 Quoted in Nanay, "Aesthetic Experience of Artworks and Everyday Scenes," 71–82, (quote on pages 5–6).

aesthetic quality of an ordinary object – in this case, language. I am asking for words to be seen as aesthetic *works*.

My belief is that words develop different aesthetic characteristics because of the ways in which they have been said. A multitude of voices animates each word, the voice of all those people who have lived and trembled and nattered in this region of language. My interest, then, in the notion of voice is not only an interest in the idea of a personal voice, to be understood in terms of finding my voice or making a word my own – as it was in the ambition to give force to my words, discussed in Section 1; it is also an interest in the idea of shareable voices, the voices which live on in language. When we speak, we assume *other people's* voices, the voices of the living and the dead, joining in a play that started long ago. Language is made up of the whole anonymous history of human speech, everything that anyone has said, or left unsaid, in pubs, streets, and palaces; bedrooms, kitchens, hovels, and suites; on camera, on stage, on their deathbeds; in letters or in books; or sent for a peasant boy to announce in a distant home – which gives to the exploration of our language an excitement as if we could raise the dead or assume their souls, our words being full of evocations of lost life, remembrances not only of what humanity has cared about, but also of *how* it has cared, as if our voices were mediums of affection.

These alterations of the voice can be of great significance, releasing a music in the word unheard before and influencing its *meaning*. "Nasty," with its mix of juicy assonance and metallic tang can be used pretty much as a compliment nowadays, the celebration of ambiguous desire: think of "that's a nasty tune" whilst enjoying a piece of music, or "that was a nasty party last night" where this "nasty" is a term of ecstatic praise, an acknowledgment of the power of that party. The foulness of the word expresses ecstasy, a mark of the experience's intensity. Some other words seem to have been honed by centuries of thought and feeling, like miniature myths celebrated in the quiet ritual of everyday speech. I know that I am the descendant of those people who fell in love with a certain kind of idiocy when I consider my own wild joy at hearing words like "wally," "muppet," and "plonker." Being a wally or a plonker isn't a good thing; that's not the point. The point is that you can call someone a wally or a plonker *lovingly*; these words caress; they express camaraderie – like the idea of us all being sinners but tuned to a more comical key. Think: "You wally," tousling your son's head after he has made a silly joke. Or, after someone has made a mistake but you want to comfort him: "You really are a plonker." The jolliness of these words comes from a whole history of people's joy in saying them: you can hear in them a tenderness, even a gratitude, for the very fact of the plonker – a hooray that plonkers exist. The plonker within me and without saves me from a shrivelling puritanism, a poorer world. Or perhaps the point is this: a world in which nobody was ever *called* a "wally" or a "plonker" would be a poorer one – less cheerful, less fun: because what I want is to live amongst people who say these words, who can take with such good humour our fatedness to idiocy. Learning to say this word how it should be said involved learning this jolly attitude towards idiocy. It is not only combinations of words, then, that can be masterpieces; *single words can be masterpieces, too*, crafted over epochs. A different labour goes into their creation. They have been honed by the artistry of the voice. They are masterpieces of pronunciation.

5 The Tension Between Poetry and Ordinary Language

Many discussions of the relation between ordinary life and some pursuit of a life more extraordinary seem to me limited in value because they remove the *tension* between these two dimensions of human life. It has been my aim, on the other hand, to keep this tension alive. I now intend to increase it.

Stanley Rosen, for one example of this, writes: "The adjective 'ordinary' does not designate a part or type of experience that we undergo or produce, independently of extraordinary experience. It rather refers to the ongoing continuity of experience to which we appeal, often without noticing or calling attention to it, when we engage in theoretical efforts to discover or construct the structure of intelligibility, or to transform

or modify it in the light of a religious or aesthetic vision."[21] This goes with Rosen's larger point that the ordinary is the often-unacknowledged background of human life, its basic structure. In a way, I have no objection to this idea: ordinary language in some sense provides the ABC out of which technical vocabularies and poetry are constructed. I even said something similar myself, when I talked of poetry's ability to unleash the power latent in ordinary words. In another sense, however, Rosen's description fixes the fluid concept of the ordinary in a single vision of it – as the background or basic structure of human life. This makes it seem as if the relation between the ordinary and the extraordinary were like that between a foundation and what is built upon it, a relation of support. But there are many other senses of the word "ordinary" relevant to a discussion of poetry. For example, our frustration with the way people ordinarily speak – their halfheartedness or carelessness; or our helplessness before people's narrow sense of what *counts* as ordinary – say, normal or acceptable; or our restlessness in the midst of ordinary life, with all its casualties of inattention, etc. Here, the relation between the ordinary and the extraordinary is not primarily one of support, but also of fissure, division, antagonism. (I will discuss this more later on.)

Another example of this loss of tension, this time between ordinary language and its extraordinary counterpart, is this from Toril Moi, from her book *The Revolution of the Ordinary*: "Fundamentally, there is just ordinary language, language that *works*, and thus helps us to draw distinctions, to see the world more clearly. As we have seen, the opposite of this is not a different, non-ordinary language, but language that *idles*."[22] Language that idles is described by Moi as follows: "When language is 'idling,' its gears and levers aren't connecting with anything. The words come out, but they make no difference. We think we are saying something meaningful, but we are not. When this happens, we are using words 'absolutely,' or 'outside language-games.' Literary critics inspired by theories of the sublime have tried to make the idea of speaking outside language games into a 'particularly literary gesture.' I certainly agree that literature can be a site for experiments in meaninglessness. But there is nothing specifically literary – and certainly nothing sublime – about speaking outside language-games."[23] I can see why Moi says this: she wants: (i) to warn us about empty uses of language – like certain philosophical reifications of words like "truth," "soul," "knowledge" etc.; (ii) to make sure that ordinary language isn't fetishised or fixed in a compulsory image: as one place – like the home – or one language – like the chat of the man on the street – or one form of life – like that of the worker or the parent – standing for the whole thing. Ordinary life is not limited to cleaning the dishes and taking the kids to school. It is not the life of the peasantry or the working class. Ordinary language is not the same as colloquial language or banality, etc. The ordinary is whatever is ordinary *to us*, which we keep having to work out for ourselves.

But, again, whereas Moi makes it seem like the only relevant one, this is just one use of the word "ordinary." Its application here is as a piece of advice to philosophers. As she says, ordinary language is the language of "differences" that beckons to those lost in philosophy's absolutes. "Working concepts teach us differences; idle ones draw no distinctions" (Moi, 74).[24] Human beings are imagined escaping out of everyday life into fantasies of extraordinariness – and, so, as needing to be called back. Equivalent advice in talking about poetry might be to warn us away from that affectation of romanticism, which makes us reach for fancy words and ostentatious syntax, reminding us instead of the power of familiar words, nearer to home, our close verbal family.[25] People say "*ergo*," "*viz.*" and "thus one can see" and they think themselves half the way to becoming philosophers; or they believe that poetry is as easy as saying words like "timorous" or "ebullient." But having only these kinds of examples in mind makes Moi, like Rosen, makes them underplay the everyday conflict, even enmity, between ordinary and extraordinary life. They write as if extraordinary forms of life had no real claim on us: they are allowed to be only sophisticated forms of self-deceit. As Moi goes on to say: "Nor is ordinary language the opposite of

21 Rosen, *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary*, 265.

22 Moi, *The Revolution of the Ordinary*, 75.

23 Ibid., 48.

24 Ibid., 74.

25 Even this is not exactly the same use of the word "ordinary": after all, we do not have to be saying that these fancy words or this ostentatious syntax leads to *senseless* writing.

'extraordinary language'. The extraordinary is at home in the ordinary."[26] But that is not right: ordinary language is sometimes the opposite of extraordinary language – as when we say "the rest of them were merely ordinary – but you, you were something else. The extraordinary, moreover, is often not at home in the ordinary, but shunned and ridiculed, as was the case with Socrates and Jesus, or any thoughtful charismatic person amongst powerful idiots.

I said I wanted to preserve the sense of "ordinary" as "mediocre, unexceptional, average," etc. Rosen and Moi neutralise this sense of it. They muffle the sound of contempt in the word "ordinary." This makes them misrepresent one of our most recurrent impressions of ordinary life: that it *is* mediocre, banal, and uninteresting, not a life worth its fee in daily suffering. This hatred of ordinary life is not always, as many philosophers are now in the habit of suggesting, part of a secret longing for emptiness, or an alibi for the avoidance of any life we might actually have a hope of living. In many cases our frustration with the so-called ordinary life is justified. Much of our speech *is* bleakly utilitarian; much of it *is* daft and absent-minded. It can seem, on some days, as if everybody's mouth was stuffed with chatter and moral nonsense. They're all too busy to think. I often seem to be living in a nightmare banality. Sometimes, the only talk is smalltalk. Nobody on the train home from work or at the table next to me in the café says things like, "For in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil must give us pause" or "The invisible worm that flies in the night in the howling storm has found out thy bed of crimson joy and his dark secret love does thy life destroy" etc. I can imagine someone's mind blown by the mere suggestion of it: "These people – *they say nothing of the sort!*" The Romantic artists, as described, for example, by Frank Kermode in *Romantic Image*, went out of their way to escape the chatter of the crowd. Isolation and its agonies were the prices for access to poetry's supreme insights, its raptures of lucidity. John Keats, for example, said that he would "bear anything – any misery, even imprisonment – so long as I have neither wife nor child."[27]

I am not saying I agree with all this. What I do think, though, is that we have all felt a disgust and aversion towards ordinary life and, even in enlightened moments afterwards, thought of this reaction, not as a tantrum or a mistake, but as one with its own plenitude of insights. It is not a scepticism towards all possible realities that animates us at these moments, but a specific dissatisfaction with this one. These dissatisfactions – our humanity ashamed of itself – have been the sources of many developments in human life – many developments of thought and language. Poetry, like philosophy, expresses a higher ambition for human life. It, like philosophy again, is driven by a need to *break* with human thinking as it stands, to transfigure our current ways of expressing ourselves. Many of our words and phrases – a lot of them now ordinary to us – must have come into being out of such experiences or were honed under their influence. We left the animal kingdom, and we find many times a day that we must leave it again.

The need to go beyond the ordinary has gone into our making, over and again, in countless different forms. Not to appreciate this is to live in a state of false consciousness, as if believing that all words and capacities were born with us, part of the fabric of a fixed world. But the bodies of our ancestors, who had no cars, no bicycles, and no horse, are found buried hundreds of miles from the places of their births, in regions of fruits and spices, or lands of tumbling rivers and bitter herbs, paradises of novelty where new life was disclosed to them. We late humans only exist because those who came before us explored beyond the perimeters of what was given to them as ordinary life. These instincts for exploration and expansion also influenced moral life. We invented Jesus and Oedipus and Jove so that we could live in the light of nobler destinies. Friendship, gentleness, and pity, like impossibilities, still amaze us when we see their true forms, so in excess of utility and unamenable to strategic thinking. Mercy, like a smile softening the stiff face of justice, is always astonishing, a redemption from the stinginess of judgement. People who think that words are merely words may not bother to say what they mean, or mean what they say, their adult lives becoming like 60-year-long shrugs. But those who spent time sculpting and honing our language, allowing it to mellow in the warmth of their experiences, so that we can all now say, "no, not pleasure, *bliss*; not

26 Moi, *The Revolution of the Ordinary*, 162.
27 Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 10.

kindness, *tenderness*...etc." – they enriched us all with their passion for the meaningfulness of what they said. The first person to call someone "a waste of space" or the one who immortalised someone's clumsiness with the words "he's all thumbs" or who stepped in with jolliness to defend a child, declaring "he wouldn't say boo to a goose," these people, too, left their tribes and went somewhere no one else had been before. When we sit with these phrases and listen to them, reliving the marvel of their creation, we enjoy the clarity of feeling that once brought them to life, discourse compressed into a form of vital action. All these achievements, parts of the spiritual evolution of our species, we inherit as language.

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