

HOMECOMING

By Jay Parini

First, let me say that I'm delighted to be here. And I don't mean, like George Burns, that at my age I'm delighted to be anywhere. St. Andrews is home to me -- I spent seven crucial years in this little town at a very crucial point in my growing up years -- and the subject of this talk is "homecoming" in the broadest sense. I'm going to look at this subject from a literary viewpoint and a personal view, theoretically and practically.

In a sense, there is no greater – perhaps no other – subject. Harold Bloom, that great anatomist of Romantic and modern literature, once suggested that all romance is about the journey home, in the manifold ways that we can interpret that phrase. In his essay "The Internalization of Quest Romance," he looks at ways that various poets – from Milton and Wordsworth, Blake and Shelley, through Yeats and Stevens – have conceived of this journey. The pattern of the journey is quite simple, and – in its essential form – it follows the course laid out by Joseph Campbell in his groundbreaking book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Campbell writes about what he calls the "mono-myth," the archetypal story that lies at the base of all narrative, and involves a hero (or heroine – Campbell wrote his book in 1946, when gender considerations played little or no part in his thinking). This hero ventures forth, called by mysterious powers to undertake a journey. This journey may, often is, the journey through adolescence into adulthood. Initiation rituals are part of this journey – we're all familiar with such rituals, especially those of us who have spent a good deal of time in institutions of higher learning. The hero sets off into unfamiliar territory, where he is tested, again and again. The winning of the bride – or husband -- may be part of this journey. The hero may have to slay a knight or two along the way. Always, of course, the journey moves toward the return, as when Odysseus arrives, at last, at the island of Ithaca, returns to his oak-centered bed with Penelope.

Campbell, in this book and his four-volume study called *The Masks of God*, tracks the various transformations of this mono-myth in literature, myth, and legend, ranging widely from ancient myths in far-flung places to the great modernist invocations of Joyce and Eliot. I would recommend this work to those of you unfamiliar with its bounties.

Now I'm not going to equate my own journey with that of Odysseus or Leopold Bloom: rest assured. Most of us are not heroic in any way, apart from the usual challenges we face and, sometimes, meet. Yet for me, it's very moving to speak this afternoon on this particular site – so close to a primal site in my own memory (or imagined memory, which is perhaps more relevant in this case).

The old train link from Leuchars Junction used to arrive only a few hundred yards from where we now assemble, and I remember as if it happened only today my first journey on that little train. It was in September of 1968, and I was making my way alone to St. Andrews for the first time. I had no idea that I would stay for so many years in this town by the sea, with its ancient university, its golf courses, its innumerable pubs and manifold byways and distractions. I was what we now call a post-adolescent then – forty-one years ago. (I'm now somewhat post-post-adolescent, or perhaps pre-senile is a better description.)

In any case, I remember making my way with my heavy case up the stairs, into the town. It was actually late in the day or early evening. I pounded on the door of the first B & B that I found, at the base of Market Street, not far from what is now the Student Union. I was led up to a spacious, cold, rather bare room, where I spent my first week in St. Andrews, as my residence hall – St. Regs -- was not yet open for business, so to speak.

I slept deeply, and the next day after eggs and bacon and strong tea I went out to inspect my new home. I walked the streets for hours, up and down North and Street, Market Street, and the sideways streets – Bell Street, Butts Wynde, Loudon's Close, and so forth. I was – in fact – breathless with adoration, if I may borrow a phrase. The West Sands dazzled me, that amazing expanse, which still affords the best view of the town itself. Even the East Sands impressed me. I loved the pier and ruined castle, the ruined

cathedral, even the ruined people – the town, in those days, had its share of drunks and laggards. The town imprinted itself on my imagination, and – this is absolutely true – it remains the main site of my dreams, four decades on. I seem to hover in perpetual mental space somewhere between the Cross Keys Bar and the shaved lawn of St. Salvator's College, with only occasional excursions beyond the medieval city walls.

I often wonder about this – the fact that St. Andrews figures so prominently in my dreams. Was it just an impressionable age? Perhaps. I doubt there is a more impressionable age than one's early twenties, when the adult world presents itself for the first time in all its complexity and wonder. My own deep feeling – or impression – is that we face the world at that age with a freshness and earnestness that shapes us, creates a tone, a tilt, that continues on through the following decades, with necessary adjustments. The adjustments are hard work, but they are adjustments nonetheless. The world-view is set, and this angle of exposure to adult reality counts as much, or more, than the world of childhood. (Here, of course, I'm contradicting Freud, but let me tell you – that feels good.)

The image of St. Andrews is burned in my mind, in part because of the people I met here but also because of the place itself. A sense of place counts a great deal, in life as in literature. My own vision of St. Andrews is closely tied to that of several mentors here: Tony Ashe, for one – he taught literature here for many years and remains a close friend -- and the poet Alastair Reid, for another. Reid, who graduated from St. Andrews after the war, was living here in the early seventies, and a little poem of his called "The Waterglass" stays in my head. It's in fact centered on a generic seaside town in Scotland but it's St. Andrews for me. I'll quote it in full:

A church tower crowned the town,
Double in air and water,
And over anchored houses
The round bells rolled at noon.
Bubbles rolled to the surface.
The drowning bells swirled down.

The sun burned in the bay.
A lighthouse towered downward,
Moored in mirroring fathoms.
The seaweed swayed its tree.
The boat below me floated
Upside down on the sky.

An underwater wind
Ruffled the red-roofed shallows
Where wading stilt-legged children
Stood in the clouded sand,
And down from the knee-deep harbor
A ladder led to the drowned.

Gulls fell out of the day.
The thrown net met its image
In the window of the water,
A ripple slurred the sky.
My hand swam up to meet me,
And I met myself in the sea.

Mirrored, I saw my face
In the underworld of the water,
And saw my drowned self sway in
The glass day underneath –
Till I spoke to my speaking likeness,
And the moment broke with my breath.

“A haunted town it is to me,” as Andrew Laing – another of our St. Andrews poets -- would say.

Now I want to avoid sentimentalizing this town or its university or that particular phase in my life. It's too easy, and way too inviting. I always think fondly of St. Andrews; but that involves a good deal of forgetting. I know that, at times, I was lonely and frustrated here, confused or perplexed. This is all part of the journey of course, and homecoming is about clarification, about arrival at a place one thought was familiar and recognizing, once again, its essential strangeness. I would quote Seneca here, who famously said: “Things that are hard to bear are sweet to remember.”

I don't think I'll dwell on the hard things here, however. I'm going to forget the winters of sleet, the short days, the usual irritations of climate. I'm not going to talk about bad weathers, external or internal. This is a festival, after all, and I want to be festive. And I hope to acknowledge the role that St. Andrews played in my own development, in the development of so many others, and I also want to remember the origins of STANZA, which has become a major venue for poetry in the English-speaking world – a development that would have surprised me, and my friends, forty years ago.

When I came to St. Andrews, the English Department was a meager affair, held together by Tony Ashe and Tom Duncan. There was only one professor, always referred to as “the Professor.” He was Alec Falconer, who once wrote a book called *Shakespeare and the Sea*, which he followed up with *A Glossary of Naval and Gunnery Terms in Shakespeare*. He had, himself, been an officer in the Royal Navy during the war, and this was the primary experience of his life. I remember one night in the early seventies, arriving on a dark night with him at Castle House, where the English Department lived in those days (now the home of poetry in the university, I believe). We met on the stone steps and looked to sea together. The waves were churning. “It's a cruel night on the sea,” he said. “We must keep watch.”

I do believe, in his own mind, we were escorting the Fleet into dangerous waters, threatened by German aircraft. His mind was always on the war, even *in* the war. His taste in literature was narrow, I might add. He discouraged the reading of modern writers, which meant anything published after Kipling's *Jungle Books*. He once told me that his favorite modern novelist was Hugh Walpole – an odd confession, in fact. He hated James Joyce, and didn't want students reading such trash. Lawrence was anathema. He disliked T. S. Eliot and, of course, W.H. Auden, who was “a traitor to his people during the war.” Auden had gone to America in 1939, and Professor Falconer never forgave him for it. It was, for me, difficult to understand this man, with whom I had long conversations in his vast, book-lined room in Castle House. Professor Falconer nevertheless had a deep love of Shakespeare, especially in his maritime aspect, and he also loved Wordsworth. Faulkner may, indeed, have been the only professional critic of the past century to prefer the late Wordsworth to the early Wordsworth – but that's another matter.

In any case, contemporary poetry was not welcome in the house of Falconer. I once brought Alastair Reid into his office to chat with him about the possibility that Alastair might offer some classes on poetry, and he was polite enough. But he told me afterward, “We do not need people writing more poetry. There is quite enough already.”

I joined the Poetry Society in my first term in St. Andrews, and – to my dismay – found it less than flourishing. We met once or twice a month that term, often in the bar of the Cross Keys, and would read poems to each other – our own poems. Interest in this circle of reading grew, and I found myself (by about 1970) with a considerable group of colleagues – the term means, of course, “co-readers.” Alastair Reid sometimes met with us, and encouraged us. There was another poet in the town, Evangeline Paterson, whose husband John Paterson was a lecturer in Geography. We often met at Evangeline's purple-tinted house – everything was some shade of that royal color, even the toilet – and we drink cups of instant coffee or tea and ate biscuits and recited our poems to each other. These gatherings might last for three or four hours, and that, for me, was poetry in St. Andrews.

By 1972, I was more or less running this informal gathering of would-be poets. We sensibly decided we must have readings by poets from the outside, and there were several in the immediate vicinity. Anne Stevenson was in Dundee or in Glasgow with her then-partner, Philip Hobsbaum. They came many times to St. Andrews and read their poems to us and talked to us. We held a small festival of poets in 1972, inviting such poets as Stephen Spender and Norman McCaig to read. These occasions were rather sparsely attended, minimally publicized.

In the spring of 1973, we put together a more substantial version of the previous year's festival, and got some backing from local friends of poetry and from the university itself. I have a vivid memory of that particular event, held in Lower College Hall, over a period of two or three days. The main readers were Seamus Heaney, who had just published *Wintering Out* and read widely from that collection, Alastair Reid (of course), George MacBeth, and Ian Crichton Smith, who was at the time a schoolmaster near Glasgow, and a poet of considerable fame in Scottish circles.

I think of those years in Scotland as a turning point in my own life. I began to write poems seriously, and to study poetry in a systematic way, often at length with Tony Ashe, Alastair, and Anne Stevenson. On a Sunday I would take a train to Glasgow to attend a seminar that Philip Hobsbaum would hold with Anne Stevenson in their spacious sitting room. These were vigorous evenings, and poets would read their work and be subjected to fierce scrutiny. Scrutiny is the right word here: Hobsbaum was a former student of F.R. Leavis at Downing College, Cambridge. He had done his doctoral thesis under William Empson – one of the most lively and interesting critics of his era. The rigorous attention given to texts by the critics carried over nicely into a writing seminar. Everyone spoke bluntly about what they saw or heard in a poem. The focus on language was nothing short of ferocious.

There was, in Scotland during those years, a revival of sorts for poetry. I did my best to meet, and sit at the feet of, various poets that I admired – including Hugh MacDiarmid and George Mackay Brown. The latter, in particular, meant a great deal to me. With a friend from St. Andrews, I made the pilgrimage across the Pentland Firth to Orkney, where George met us at

the ferry, his jaw jutting outward, his eyes shining, his wild hair blowing in the stiff wind. We moved quickly to a warm pub in Kirkwall. I remember that particular journey because I was miserably seasick on the crossing, and the only way I could keep my mind off being sick was by reciting declensions of Latin nouns (I was studying Latin with Adrian Gratwick at the time, and he had given me something to memorize). I loved the novels, stories, and poems of Mackay Brown, and I studied them closely – there was so much to learn about concreteness of imagery by reading him with attention. His lyrical stories to this day live in my head. And the bare, beautiful landscape of Orkney seemed a complete world in his fiction and poems: the equivalent to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpa County in Mississippi or Frost's north New England or Steinbeck's Monterey. Each of those locales became a discrete universe, a place where the author could explore the human condition in all its variety and strangeness, while giving "a local habitation and a name" to feelings that we all share.

Let me backtrack. I had a tutor in modern history, Ann Wright, who was also the warden of Hamilton Hall, one of the most glorious buildings in St. Andrews, a former golf hotel that the university had turned into a residence hall for women. I recall the very afternoon when, in the midst of a tutorial on George III, Miss Wright said, "And what do you hope to do with your life, Mr. Parini?"

I said, "I would like to write poetry."

Miss Wright looked startled, then sat back. "Ah, then you must meet Alastair."

She picked up the phone and called Alastair Reid on the spot. A meeting was arranged for the next day, at noon, at the Central – a pub on Market Street that is still, I believe, on the same spot. I approached the pub that day with some trepidation: I had never met a poet before. Alastair was standing at the bar, alone, and he welcomed me with a warm greeting and a pint of Export. We talked for some time about poetry and poets. He seemed quite excited that I was writing something on Gerard Manley Hopkins at the time. He recited from memory two or three poems by Hopkins, and we talked

about the alliterative thrust, the assonantal music, that was so particular to Hopkins.

Alastair said to me, almost wistfully: “So, you want to write poems?”

I nodded, sheepishly.

“In which case,” he said, “you must bring me a poem tomorrow at four. Come to Pilmour, and we’ll have tea, and I’ll correct your poem.”

I was amazed by the choice of that verb, “correct.” But I dutifully got on my bicycle and, with a new poem in my rucksack, set out through a soft drizzle to Pilmour Cottage, the hauntingly beautiful house in a rookery with startling views of the sea where Alastair lived with his young son Jasper.

A kettle was set on the stove, and Alastair put my poem on the large kitchen table. He invited me to sit beside him, and I watched in amazement as he “corrected” the poem, crossing out words and supplying alternatives, rearranging stanzas. The whole first stanza suffered a ferocious X, erasing it forever.

Now Alastair explained to me his method. He had graduated from St. Andrews after the war, as a student of the classics. He wrote a note to Robert Graves, in Mallorca, explaining that he would be visiting Spain in a few weeks and hoped to call on the poet. He included a few of his own poems.

Graves wrote back to say that he liked the poems very much, and he thought he could use the young man’s services. He had been engaged by Penguin in London to translate *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* by Suetonius, and he needed someone to make a rough translation for him. Alastair went there straightaway, and he became, in effect, a secretary to Graves.

He remembered bringing the first few pages of his translation to Graves. Graves looked it over briskly and told Alastair to sit beside him. The

process of “correction” began at once, with words crossed out right, left, and center. Suddenly adjectives disappeared, as stronger nouns replaced the ones Alastair had chosen. Adverbs, too, were absorbed into stronger verbs. Graves transformed passive constructions into active ones. The prose became, at once, clearer, harder. “There is no writing,” said Graves. “There is only re-writing.”

This was a lesson that Alastair Reid taught me, and it’s one I’ve tried to bring to my students.

In a sense, all writing is an effort to get closer and closer to some imagined place, and this place is, after all, a kind of home. We may associate this home with a given place – St. Andrews is such a luminous place for me, to this moment – a bright and shimmering postage stamp of a town, bounded by its medieval walls – or what remains of them – bounded by the sea itself. But it’s a representative place – that is, it stands in for all places of transformation, places where the earth itself offered a place to stand and offered some magical energies, too.

I would recall the myth of Antaeus here. The legendary wrestler was the son of Poseidon and Gaia, or “mother Earth.” He derived his enormous strength from his contact with the ground itself, and – as long as one foot touched the earth – he could not be defeated. It was Heracles who, famously, held him in the air to strangle him – cracking his ribs despite groans from his mother, Earth. (I might here refer you to a wonderful poem by Seamus Heaney called, simply, “Antaeus.”)

One thing I learned in St. Andrews is that place matters, and that poets in particular benefit from having a foot planted somewhere.

Before I close, I should mention one other interesting visitor to St. Andrews during the early seventies: Jorge Luis Borges. I remember the day when Alastair, who was translating Borges at the time, told me that the great man himself would put in an appearance. In truth, I’d never read a word of Borges at the time. I barely knew the name. But I saw that Alastair was impressed, so I was impressed. This must be someone special.

The Argentine writer appeared, staying at Pilmour Cottage with Alastair and Jasper. I went to dinner on the night of his arrival, and was somewhat puzzled. Borges was blind, he tended to monologue, and everybody in the room treated him as the source of all wisdom. He said he was delighted to be in Scotland, at last: the home of one of his favorite writers, Robert Louis Stevenson. He quoted from memory some key lines of verse, which seem oddly appropriate to my theme today:

Under the wide and starry sky,
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die
And I laid me down with a will.

This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be,
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.

(“Requiem”)

A few days later, Alastair asked me to look after Borges, as he had to make a short trip somewhere, and so I was put briefly in charge of the elderly writer. Borges had told me, the night before, that he wanted to “see something of Scotland,” so I obliged, borrowing a car from a friend. I picked up Borges at Pilmour, and we drove along the East Neuk of Fife, stopping at one or two famous places, including a pub. Borges was in *particular* need of a pub, he told me, and he wanted a very Scottish one.

I remember going to get him a pint of Export, bringing it to him at the rude oak table, with sawdust on the floor – a serious place for drinking, strictly low church. I put the pint before him, and he smelled it carefully, sucking the foam off the glass. He was like a child, utterly delighted. His big eyes were blank, of course, and had an eerie glow to them.

Conversation seemed to grind to a halt quickly with Borges, and I found it difficult to get it going again.

I said, rather bizarrely, “Mr. Borges...Alastair has told me you’re a writer. Fiction, I believe?”

“Oh, he always says things like that,” said Borges.

“So you’re not a writer of fiction?”

“Oh, I’ve written a handful of stories, very short ones. Very short indeed.”

“So have you written a novel?” I asked. For me, the test of a writer was the novel.

“Oh no! Not a novel. No, I’m afraid not. No novel.”

I grew a little scornful, dismissive. I said, “But surely you would have liked to have written a novel?”

“Oh, yes, dear boy. I dreamed of writing a novel. It would be a great novel, epic in length, and would be set on the pampas of Argentina. It would move over many generations: fathers and sons, mothers and daughters. There would be all of life in these pages: feasts and famines, wars and rumors of wars, there would be whores and brothers, and gauchos, lots of gauchos, and the plot would involve matricide and fratricide. Love and war, peace, God, everything. Year after year I had this profound urge to write such book, a thousand pages. Then one morning, I got up early went to my desk – and I wrote a review of this novel. A few hundred words, no more. And that satisfied the urge.”

Only later did I realize what an essential and transformative writer – poet, writer of stories, essayist -- this old man had been, and still was. I still go repeatedly back to his work – *Ficciones*, in particular, and the essays in *Other Inquisitions*.

I should also say this anecdote about the long unwritten novel was one of Borges repertoire of stories: he told them over and over, perfecting his narrative as he went, or adjusting to circumstances.

I took Borges back to Pilmour Cottage, and remember walking in with him into the dense high rookery that led into the house. I wrote a poem about this experience, which I'll share with you. It's called "Borges in Scotland," and it's a poem I wrote some three decades after the event.

In the dismal garden at Pilmour
I watched old Borges, blind man leaning
on his stick among the iron trunks of beech,
a wing-dark canopy of claws above him.

Gusts of salt wind swayed the trees,
rippling the feathers of the bracken floor.
"It's rooks," he said, ears opening like palms.
The empty headlights of his eyes turned up.

So Borges listened and was birds.
A soot-cloud rose, world-blackening,
the hard-by thunder of a thousand birds
who called his name now: Borges, Borges.

I hope from what you've heard in this ambling if not rambling talk that St. Andrews has meant a great deal to me. It was a magical place at the beginning of my life as a writer, as a young adult. I had wonderful conversations here, about literature and life, with Tony Ashe and Alastair, with Kenneth and Audrey Dover, with Gordon and Jay William, with Kif and Adela Rathbone, Paul Bibire, Laurie Dennett, Philip Parry, and so many others. I had a warm association with the poet Evangeline Paterson. I was often visited by poets: Anne Stevenson, Philip Hobsbaum, John Heath-

Stubbs. In the course of readings at our little poetry society, I met the likes of Heaney and McCaig, Spender and so many others. My ideas about what a poem is, or can be, derive from those years, and it's heartening to think that poetry has flourished on this significant soil, and that the School of English here has seen fit to bring so many poets and writers of fiction under its wing. And STANZA itself has flourished, part and parcel of the literary world arising from this soil.

When I think of St. Andrews, as I said, it's very difficult not to sentimentalize the experience. But it's tempting. Very tempting. I think of that poem by Auden: "Goodbye to the Mezzogiorno," where he writes something that seems an appropriate: "Though one cannot always remember exactly why one has been happy / There is no forgetting that one was."

I don't really know why I liked it here so much: the good company, the memorable conversations, the unexpected gusts of wind tantamount to inspiration, the sea views and sands, the broken towers, the narrow streets with their strict, imposing facades of stone. It's all of these things, I suppose, and may they flourish in the years to come.