



## Gone Fishing

Blueberry Lake. Mid-September. We arrived at one. Sunny but cool. I proceeded to take a nap. But now, an hour later, I'm already into my groove.

Why do we go to the lake? To fish, of course. We bring a suitcase of books and fish for entertainment, controversy, enlightenment. Enlightenment through controversy.

I was reading an essay by Lionel Trilling in the collection called *Beyond Culture*. He's attempting to come to grips with the strange task of teaching modern literature, asking himself what the point of it all is, I guess. However, there seems to be a problem in his treatment of Freud, Nietzsche, Conrad, and the question of whether we want to *accept* civilization. Can he be unaware of the fact that even in the most civilized society, civilization is only intermittently present?

He approvingly quotes Nietzsche's remark in *The Genealogy of Morals* that "art and not ethics constitutes the essential metaphysical activity of man with the validation and ratification of the primitive energies." Yet this is an odd position to be taking, in light of the fact that neither art nor ethics is metaphysical in nature. Art is important. Ethics is important. Metaphysics may even be important. These are different, though sometimes complimentary or inter-related activities. They all require energy. And they can all be primitive.

Trilling mentions Wordsworth's famous preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, drawing our attention to the place where he refers to "the grand elementary principle of pleasure" and says that it constitutes "the naked and native dignity of man." That it is the principle by which man "knows, and feels, and lives, and moves." It's an idea worth pondering.

Meanwhile, another idea surfaces: the great shift during the nineteenth century toward the idea of the "ugly" in art. Yet this shift reflects merely a change in sensibility, in taste, rather than a new and revolutionary vision of what art is.

Pleasure is too sensuous a word to convey the effect that art can have on us. This is because the impact of art can occasionally be all-embracing. On the other hand, the word "ecstasy" is not only too corny, but also suggests a degree of thoughtlessness in the response. Our appreciation of art can be pleasurable *and* thoughtful *and* all-embracing.

I recently went to an exhibit at the Walker Art Center devoted to Picasso and his American imitators. There on the wall in front of me were three pieces from Picasso's Cubist period. Rich and bristly and glossy and almost shimmering with energy. I couldn't take my eyes off them. You see these things so often in books, and it is no secret that Picasso did some great things. But somehow these painting filled the eye in a very unusual and satisfying way. More than pleasurable—profound.

On the other hand, no painting in the far more ambitious recent exhibit of Scandinavian paintings at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts had quite so dramatic an effect. There were certainly some pleasantly life-like nature scenes. Dead leaves floating on water. A crashing waterfall. A huge grassy headland that simply couldn't be anywhere in Denmark. A snowy fishing village above the Arctic Circle. All nice to look at, especially if you haven't been there (and I haven't). There were also some slightly bizarre and tortured oneiric visions. Strindberg, Munch.



Two pileated woodpeckers have been feeding on the lawn all evening.

We drove into Hayward this morning for breakfast at some Norwegian café. Mist hanging over the bogs and streams. Beautiful, cool, clear morning. Fifty-three degrees. Later we canoed around the lake. It was still pretty quiet. We saw two immature eagles, one loon, no great blue herons. I did see a northern waterthrush down near the slough.



**C**onsilience: *The Unity of Knowledge*, by Edward O. Wilson. He evidently wants to reconcile and “unite” the sciences and humanities. Bringing that old crusade back to life. Such efforts are usually directed toward bending other forms of thought to the domination of scientific “truth.” At one point Wilson writes, “Given that human action comprises events of physical causation, why should the social sciences and humanities be impervious to consilience with the natural sciences? And how can they fail to benefit from that alliance?”

Here we see the folly that ensues when an untrained mind gallops wildly across the frontiers of thought. It is clear from this passages (and others I’ve come across) that Wilson’s grasp of metaphysics and historiography is shaky at best. He takes it as a “given” that all human actions can be categorized and then reduced to principles of cause-and-effect. Yet very few human actions have even been successfully categorized and reduced to causal principles in that way. It may be fair to say, in fact, that the ones in which we take the greatest interest have *never* been understood by such means. Are we to come to an understanding of the Cubist paintings I mentioned a moment ago by determining what “caused” Picasso to cut up and rearrange his subject-matter? No, all true works of art are *sui generis*, as are all acts of enduring historical significance in every field. The study of “human action,” as Wilson refers to it, is the study of history, which has never produced laws. What it does produce is awe and dread and admiration for what men and women have been able to do in the midst of this chaos we call life. History deepens our awareness of what beauty and truth and goodness are. These are values, not formulas or behavioral categories.

Of course, science does have a part to play in solving social problems. Wilson himself is a biologist, and large sections of the book seem to be given over to ecological issues. That’s good. Scientists can tell us, for example, what will happen to a bog if ATVs roll across it indiscriminately for a decade or two, and their predictions would undoubtedly be dire. What scientists cannot tell us is how to

weigh the relative importance of mechanized joyrides through the bogs, a healthy water-table, the preservation of bird habitat—and the will of the majority. For it may be that, given a choice, the majority of Americans would chose to have their fun now, and the future be damned. These are moral and political issues, not scientific ones. And I would put the desire to run wild through the woods on a snow-machine or ATV alongside a painting by Picasso in the category of “poetry”—something which is vital to living though its weight is difficult to measure.

Wilson’s attempt to “unify” knowledge fails to recognize that science, art, morals, cannot be folded into or subsumed by one another following a scissors-paper-rock scheme. Each is important and autonomous within its domain. What scientists can and ought to do (and have been doing), is to tell us in no uncertain terms, “If this, then this...”



There is a big difference between ethics and “ethical standards.” Discussions about the decay of civilization and the crumbling of shared values often end with an impassioned cry along the following lines, (which Wilson quotes):

*For those who believe that neither God nor natural law nor transcendent Reason exists, and who recognize the varied and subtle ways in which material interest—power—has corrupted, even constituted, every previous morality, how is one to live, to what values can one hold fast?*

Well, let’s face facts. If you believe that there is no God, and no other source of transcendental order, and no other motive for action than self-interest and the acquisition of wealth and power, then it should be clear that there is only one way to live—by acquiring wealth and power! People who believe such things do not suffer the pangs of conscience being exhibited here. They do not cry out, “How is one to live?”

No, people only utter such a cry if they have a conscience, and that implies at least an inchoate

inking of divinity or fellow-feeling, which in turn sheds a glimmer of light in the direction of transcendental meaning. And if you do have a conscience, then it should be of use to you in determining how to live.

Can the conscience be improved? Why not? I have just been suggesting, perhaps a bit obliquely, that you could cultivate it by studying history, art, the lives of others, or whatever. Ethical life is rooted in conscience, not in ethical standards that we can “hold fast” to.

At one point Wilson observes that the great divide today is not between religions, races, or any other such category, but between scientific and pre-scientific cultures. Yet within living memory cultures with an advanced understanding of scientific principles have murderously beset one another to the tune of a hundred million dead. Go figure. I’m not sure it’s quite accurate to suggest that we live in a scientific culture anyway. There is nothing scientific about our legal system or our political institutions. Can our economy be said to be “scientific”? Quite the reverse. Our culture draws upon the fruits of scientific research and the wonders of industrial technology. But to take a simple example, the fact that cell-phones have become ubiquitous indicates not that we have become more technological or scientific, but that we have become more communicative. Are the comic books, rock bands, novels, and reality-TV shows of the current age scientific? Not at all. In fact science contributes almost nothing to our culture, except to provide us with better versions of things we already have. TV screens, pesticides, medications. No, it is the conceit of the scientist to think we live in a scientific culture.



Hilary invited me to lie on the ground with her in front of the cabin. It was nice. Then two or three eagles began to soar above us in circles, giving their piercing cry. (I could not be sure of the number because one of them was always out of sight amid the leaves.)

Later I found Hilary lying on the ground in the grass *behind* the cabin. I joined her—and after a

few minutes a sharp-shinned hawk began circling overhead.

The sound of many nuthatches beeping simultaneously. There is something very funny about that.



I just finished the introduction to an old student edition of Francis Bacon’s *Essays*. (It’s strange what you stuff into your book bag on the way out the door.) The editor seems to be of the opinion that it’s OK to be wishy-washy, venal, disloyal, and corrupt, so long as your Latin is top-flight and you have a proper enthusiasm for inductive reasoning.

A short walk down the logging road to celebrate the afternoon. And then back here to the couch.

Bacon, *On Truth*: rejects the “delight in giddiness” that questions whether truth can ever be “fixed.” Yet it seems to me that truth *can* never be fixed. After all, we’ve all been certain of things that have turned out to be untrue. Why not admit it? (I like the phrase “delight in giddiness” though.)

He finds that even in his own advanced time “there remain certain discoursing wits which are of these veins, though there be not so much blood in them as was in those of the ancients.” The editor applies a footnote to explain the word “discoursing” though it’s clear that Bacon is talking about the deconstructionists.

A bit later he quotes Heraclitus. “Dry light is ever the best,” which he interprets to mean ‘in light that a man receiveth by counsel from another, is dryer and purer than that which cometh from his own understanding and judgment; which is ever infused and drenched in his affections and customs.’ But perhaps Heraclitus was actually just making a comment about the weather?



SUNDAY MORNING, 7:15. Very quiet. Orange sunrise between the trees and the bank of gray clouds.



MONDAY MORNING. 6:40. Through the trees a band of clouds, pale yellow. Otherwise the sky is a pale blue. Already quite a bit of wind rustling in the trees. It's going to be a nice day, methinks.

Yesterday morning early I went down to the dock. Two young eagles came up the shoreline at treetop level and flew directly over my head. Big handsome birds. Dark, powerful, confident, calm. At the far end of the lake they circled for a few minutes, soaring in tandem, then in contrary rings, little more than dots in the sky. Then they returned the way they'd come, flying side by side rather than single file. Once again directly over my head.

I heard their high-pitched creaky call again just now. I ought to get dressed and go out. That second cup of coffee can wait.

And now I hear the eagles almost chirping. And the sun has disappeared above the blanket of clouds: the day's gotten darker.



A morning paddle around the lake. Two loons at the south end. A road-grader, yellow, making a good deal of noise as he passes back and forth down the gravel road beyond the cottages and houses that line the lake.

Very few people out. The sky remains gray, and things take on a blue-green caste, rich and heavy, though not especially melancholy. Lots of seaweed on the bottom near shore, seemingly woven into a mat. In the bay at the north end some men are loading their boat off the trailer into the water on a concrete ramp. We see two sandpipers, a heron, a kingfisher. It's a little amazing to think how much capital, how much material prosperity, is in evidence on the shores of this remote lake—yet almost no one is around to enjoy or make use of it.



TUESDAY MORNING 6:53. The hideous tea-pot is once again making that annoying hissing sound.

It was gray all day yesterday, though also humid and warmer than the day before. The sun was always nearby, and I could often see a golden tinge on the far shore of the lake. It was also very windy. No doubt some new weather system was arriving. There were stars last night, but later it rained heavily, and it's still drizzling now, though it's ten degrees warmer than it was yesterday. Right now I see the sun blazing like a red-hot piece of iron through a break in the clouds. It may be the last time we see it today. Then again, it may clear up. Who knows?

I spent most of the afternoon reading a mystery set in medieval Wales. That was an utter waste of time, though I enjoyed it. I should have been reading Bacon's *New Atlantis*, or some such balderdash. I also brought up a book of essays called *Fire and Knowledge* by a Hungarian named Péter Nádas. And a book about poetry, more analysis than criticism, called *The Art of Attention: A Poet's Eye*, by Donald Revell.

In short, with all this free time to think and read, I ought to be thinking about something interesting and important. No? Do these books I've mentioned have a connection? Categories of knowledge? Poetry as religion? Poetry as a means of exposing ourselves to the preciousness of life, through words or sounds or images, if not face to face.

There is a very heavy rain coming down. With thunder. It turns the woods a beautiful blue-gray. Finally the windows become streaked with water and the woods are no longer quite so beautiful.



The rain stopped. We ate some eggs with onions and toast. Went down to the lake to sit on the dock. Watched the rain recommence. Beautiful patterns on the surface of the water. Listening to the eagles squawk down on the island. Walked over to the Swenson's place. Nice views of the island and the lake. Hilary has gone on down the road to examine the winterberry.

There is something a little sad about seeing this bright red berry that appears in the fall. In some years there is hardly any, while in other years it

seems to be all over the place. We ask ourselves why and have fun tossing theories around that we never take the time to nail down empirically. (Bacon would disapprove.)

But when you see it, you can hardly resist the temptation to cut some off and bring it inside. (Maybe that's why it's prolific one year and scarce the next.) The branching structure is nice, the berries are scattered in profusion, but irregularly, and they tend to fall off whenever you happen to brush by it, which adds to the irregularity. Yes, there is definitely something winter-like about winterberries. Handsome and bright, but soon the leaves will wither and die off. Better than plastic flowers, but we must resign ourselves to a long season of diminished color, life, energy.

In the last ten minutes the rain has abated considerably and the sky has grown much lighter.

But now it returns again, the rain, and heavy grayness with it. Cabin in the rain.

Hilary has gone in swimming. Taken a shower. Washed her hair.



I read in *Advancement of Learning* that Bacon rejects several types of knowledge or learning, namely Aristotelian disputation, humanistic philology, and magical Platonism. The type he favors is inductive reasoning—that thing we call science.

Now, there is no use denying that scholastic disputation can easily become pointless and rhetorical. But with regard to humanism, though the study of “texts” can be a vain and pointless exercise, to actually *read* a piece of literature is often grand and rewarding. And it seems to me that there is enormous merit in the magical Platonism espoused by Ficino, Bruno, and others. Their forays into natural science were seldom worth much, perhaps, but the speculative vein itself is not to be despised. Even the Periodic Table would seem to be something out of this bag of metaphysical mumbo-jumbo, except that it happens to fit the facts so well.

And now I'm wishing that I had stuffed Ficino rather than Bacon into my bookbag. I have always

admired his essay in which he offers a long list of reasons why God is like the sun, and then, making that ultimate leap of faith, concludes that God *is* the sun. The reasoning is dubious, but one can only admire the naivety with which he proceeds.



It rained all day today, sporadically. We took a walk along the road that cuts through Chippewa Flowage. A few hooded mergansers, a heron, a huge snapping turtle out in the bay with his snout up. All the plants along the roadside were fresh from the rain—the tansy, the knapweed, the smartweed, the clover. The alder bushes are a dull red. Most of the other trees are still green, though a branch of a maple tree has turned a brilliant red here and there, like a purple streak in someone's hair. The grasses on the west side of the highway have turned yellow, and things look quite varied and lovely out in that direction, what with the mist and all. We're savoring every moment, just soaking in the elements.



I read an entire novel today. *The Portrait* by Iain Pears. Slightly tedious, predictable, unpleasant. In fact, thoroughly as brown and dull as the period of English painting during which the drama is set.

WEDNESDAY MORNING 7:10. It rained all night, off and on. It's still entirely gray. This is the simple life. Nothing to do but read and write and eat. Go for a walk or a canoe ride.

Reading about Renaissance Platonism yesterday, I was reminded of the concept of “participation.” It's something different from analysis or understanding. To know the difference between right and wrong is one thing. The feel that you are doing the right thing is something entirely different.

Hilary was telling me about an article she had just read detailing Jimmy Carter's efforts to wipe out malaria in Ethiopia. I was listening dutifully, but I had trouble bending my brain around the situation. Up here at the cabin, where there is no news, everything becomes immediate. I guess

that's why I can read a mediocre novel cover to cover, whereas at home I can hardly get through a magazine article—there is so much information floating around.

Back to knowledge as participation. The sailor *knows* the sea. The violinist *knows* her instrument.

## II

Seagull Bay Motel. Bayfield, Wisconsin. We had a pleasant drive up. Stopped in at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center. Paid a visit to a used book store in Washburn. I bought a paperback copy of some of Plato's early dialogues. Hilary bought a copy of Jane Austen's *Emma*.

Just past Washburn there's a beautiful sandy beach from which you can look out across Chequamegon Bay. The place almost seemed tropical. We spotted a single sanderling wandering along the beach. Asked a young woman in the sandy parking lot about bike trails nearby, and got a well-meaning but long-winded and irrelevant reply.

The motel has a nice front yard looking out across the channel to Madeline Island. But there are too many people sitting around enjoying it, playing on their laptops. One man was chattering on his cell-phone about a travel club. "And you can get your fifty dollars back if you're not satisfied. There's a thirty-day trial." Meanwhile, we watched quite a few palm warblers land on the fencepost right in front of us, bob their tails, and then move on. We also watched the ferries passing back and forth between Madeline Island and the mainland.

We took the ferry out to the island earlier this afternoon. The sun was shining then. Basswood Island, that big flat lump of land to the north, and others further out, shimmering on the horizon. Being out on the open water, heading somewhere. Isn't that everyone's dream?

We walked along the waterfront down the main street of La Pointe, past the harbor to the graveyard where Michel Cadotte is buried. An hour and a half later we were back at the ferry dock. During that time the cloud cover had increased, the wind had come up, and we were getting cold. Nevertheless we

rode back to Bayfield in the open. That's what we'd come out here for. The air, the wind, the views.



A nice walk down a wooded path from the motel into town, past some towering and lovely white flowers that we later learned were unwanted invasives from Japan. At the ATM I dutifully pushed all the buttons and was told, at the end of the lengthy screen interview, that my request had been refused. Chippewa Bank doesn't like Wells Fargo Bank, evidently. Arriving at the grocery store to buy some milk, we found that it has just closed, though the people inside were still buying things.



*A poet, you see, is a light thing, and winged and holy, and cannot compose before he gets inspirations and loses control of his senses and his reason deserts him.*

— Plato, *Ion*



THIS MORNING I WAS UP at 5:30. I sat out on the grounds of the motel in an Adirondack chair, looking out at Orion, Sirius, Castor and Pollux, and all the rest. It was still pitch black. Venus, to the east, was 30 degrees above the horizon, I guess, and just about as bright as I'd ever seen it.

By the time Hilary came out twenty minutes later the stars were fading, though still very nice. Two old-fashioned wooden fishing boats—the kind that look like an overweight Civil War submarine—had already cranked up their well-worn engines and pattered out to sea. Or into the bay, rather. They both went off in the direction of Ashland. We walked up the hill and sat on some chairs that were beyond the reach of the yard light, clutching our coffee. Birds had begun to chirp, and there was a single swath of orange running across the sky above Madeline Island. I suspect the sun itself was half an hour away at that point. A nice way to start the day.

We once again took the wooded path into town. Breakfast at the Egg Toss. As soon as the skies brightened the haze started to blow in from the southwest and the morning became overcast, or indeterminate at best. Out to the island once again, this time with our car and bikes. Biking to Big Bay State Park, then back up the other side of the island, past woods and cabins of every description. Visited the museum, which has been greatly expanded, though all of the exhibits are still housed in the old log cabin. We drove down to the southern tip of the island, wandered the beach, then stopped to read the brass plaque affixed to the boulder marking the spot where Michel Cadotte erected his first trading post in 1793. Then out to the lagoon behind Big Bay. Slight rain. No one around. We arrived back in town just in time to catch the three o'clock ferry. By that time the rain had begun in earnest. We stayed in the car during the trip, though we probably missed one or two lightning strikes as a result. What has happened to our daring?



We've moved into a new room, which has an even better view of the lake, no one above us, direct access to our car, and a private deck. The women next door are noisy, but all-in-all it was a good move.

Just now we watched a fishing boat come in, trailing hundreds of gulls and even a few bald eagles. We're also seeing spectacular lightning strikes from time to time.

Madeline Island seems as nice as ever to me, but it isn't quite so enchanting as it was the first time I visited thirty-odd years ago. At that time I fell in love with the combination of sea, woods, pasture, and old buildings, often falling into neglect. It was neither urban nor agricultural nor truly wild, but some sort of happy weather-beaten mix.

One thing that has definitely changed on the Island is the real estate signs. They're everywhere! It seems that all the land has been divided up and put on the market. And perhaps some of the long-time residents have finally decided to sell out and move elsewhere before it's too late. That having been said,

it is perhaps equally surprising that after thirty years, the deep dark woods still covers most of the island, and the houses, cabins, and trailers you see there run the gamut from aristocratic lodges worthy of FDR to forlorn deer-hunting shacks. The beaches we went to were all deserted, and the rock cliffs are still very handsome, though nothing to rival the majestic seascapes on the North Shore. Perhaps it was just a little too gray and cool to linger.

On one of the beaches we stopped at, I was watching a kestrel harassing a little songbird out above the lake. It's a fascinating though somewhat gruesome sight, as the little bird turns a tighter circle but the bigger bird closes in and will get him in the end. Suddenly another falcon came rocketing in out of nowhere and snatched the hapless songbird. He flew off with his meal the way he'd come, and the hawk that had originally been chasing the bird flew off in the opposite direction empty-handed, probably very miffed by the whole experience. If birds have such feelings.

The rain has gotten heavier in the last half-hour. And now I see whitecaps out on the lake.

We ate dinner at Maggie's, one of three local restaurants owned by a woman named Mary Rice. We were considering a visit to her upscale eatery in the woods outside of town, Wild Rice, with its signature chefs and David Salmela architecture, but after a day in the open air wandering clifftops and bicycling down long forest highways we did not feel a strong need for \$40 steaks and \$10 wine-by-the-glass (though I'd still like to try the place someday). Maggie's little restaurant on Manypenny Street, with its kitschy pink flamingos and wild assortment of colored lights (and tasty dishes) would suit us just fine. And it did. At random intervals throughout our meal the white walls of the building next door would be suddenly illuminated by staggering bolts of lightning. The rain was coming down hard.

Hilary's risotto with maple-smoked whitefish was delightful. My grilled salmon with apple wild rice hardly less so. And after studying the menu at Wild Rice on a flyer in our motel room, everything that Maggie's had to offer looked cheap.

The later part of our evening was marred by the women watching TV in the room next door. On the other hand, it was fun watching the light from the lighthouse out on Michigan Island, which would bounce off the low-lying clouds and shine directly into our room with considerable force, though the lighthouse is at least 22 miles away.



We took the coastal route back here to the cabin. Cornucopia. Port Wing. South on county A to 27 and on south to Hayward. The sun came out, the sky turned blue, the farms and woods and pastures became pretty. In fact, it got up to 80 degrees. But now it's blustery and gray again. Maybe I should wash some windows.

We did succeed in putting the storm windows on. The weather changes every twenty minutes, blustery, sunny, rainy. Just now I heard a large thump, as if Hilary were coming in the back door. But I could see her sitting out on the porch. I got up to investigate. The top of a birch tree had crashed down into the back yard.



SATURDAY MORNING 6:45. The sun is about to appear. And I continue to write, though it's clear I have nothing to say. Looking out the window earlier this morning I saw a duck moving along the shore in silhouette. A compact bird, almost like a coot. An eagle was sitting on a dead trunk, I saw him as he flew off toward the island. And I also saw a pontoon boat move quietly along the shore in front of the dock—this too in silhouette against the pale gold of the water reflecting the clear pre-dawn sky.

Here now is the blazing sun, casting the shadow of my unwashed and unruly hair against the knotty-pine wall behind the fireplace.

This is the first clear day we've had on this trip.

Last night we cooked a fettuccine dish with chicken, mushrooms, sun-dried tomatoes. One of those meals that seem to take too long to make, considering the ho-hum result. We wandered down to the dock in the dark to see the stars, then danced

a bit to Kepa Junkera, the Basque accordion player.



I've been reading Plato's *Laches*. Can bravery be taught? Can virtue be taught? Is goodness a sort of knowledge?

(Hilary is making a pinto bean salad. It appears to have Tabasco sauce in it.)

As is so often the case with Plato, a very inconclusive and unsatisfying line of argument nevertheless makes us stop and ponder what went wrong. We finish the piece with the feeling that no satisfactory definition of bravery has been provided in the first place. After all, bravery is something other than fearlessness, as Nicias, one of the generals involved in the discussion, points out. Rather, it is steadfastness in the face of danger. But this is not quite the same thing as mere endurance, which was Laches' original definition, because endurance can be a rather mindless and even a passive quality, whereas bravery carries the sense of some worthwhile end in light of which dangers are met and overcome. We don't think of criminals as being brave. Rather we think of them as reckless, foolish, as heedless of themselves as they are of those they exploit and abuse.

Though the dialogue offers no such result, it seems to me that the arguments presented lead us to the conclusion that bravery is *not* a form of knowledge, but that military training *might* have the effect of instilling it in us nonetheless. Such an effect would be less cognitive than visceral. The word "mettle" would seem to have a place in the discussion. Such training would improve one's mettle.

Yet the mind is certainly a part of that training. A part of bravery is to train the mind to squelch the urge to flee, to cast out thoughts of personal harm, and to direct its energies toward performing diligently and effectively. The goal, after all, is not only to be brave, but to win the day. All the same, such mental effort has less to do with knowledge per se than with strength of character.

The best passage in the entire dialogue is the one in which Laches explains why he sometimes appears to be fond of such discussions, at other times not.

*You see, whenever I hear a man talking about goodness or any kind of wisdom—a real man, that is, who lives by his principles—I'm overjoyed, because I can see that the speaker is in tune with his words and that the two go together. Such a man really is, I think, a true musician: he uses the finest mode and has tuned to it not just a lyre or some other entertaining instrument, but he has tuned his own life so that his words harmonize with his actions....*



On to *The Art of Attention: A Poet's Eye*, by Donald Revell. I am suspicious of this writer, this book. It all sounds a little glib to me. For example, to define imagination as “the present state of things” seems to be a misuse of words. Though it does fit with the book's theme, which is “seeing.” I'll read on (as Shakespeare would say.)

*– The poetry of attention is not metaphysical; it succeeds by faith alone. The opened eye will see, and light will shape the materials given freely to a poet. What need for invention?... The eye doesn't invent the light; there's no need... Imagination is the present state of things, and poems rejoice—in particular, in detail—that this is so.*

*– The art of poetry is the abolition of doubt.*

*– The poetry of attention thrives on carelessness, even as it speeds our cares.*

*– Having come to his senses, a poet needs no inner life. He sees his mood spread out before him, a continuous revelation of his present circumstances. There is nothing to elaborate, nothing to work out.*

Well, I suppose it's possible—though not likely—that a simple record of what we see in front of our faces might end up sounding like poetry. And it's certainly true that efforts to add complexity, symbolism, or some sort of elaborate meaning to the immediate record of our experiences after the

fact are bound to ring false. On the other hand, Revell's use of the word “carelessness” is inexpert, if not entirely wrongheaded. We apply that word to unfortunate events that might not have taken place, if more care *had* been taken in carrying them out. “Carefree” would be a little better than “careless,” though still not quite appropriate to describe the Zen-like inattention and absence of willful effort that Revell is recommending.

It strikes me that the theories Revell is advancing in these pages are not only based on faith, they are based on a genuine delusion. Poetry is not the same thing as description. This is born out by the examples he offers to prove his point. He identifies Henry David Thoreau's two-million-word journal as a true masterpiece of “carelessness,” but the brief passages he cites are philosophical rather than descriptive. When he speaks of “pious materialism” he's referring to how swell things sometimes look, how they fill us with a giddy affection. I can understand that. In fact, I often *feel* it. But in order to convey such experiences, simple description is almost never enough. Even such a familiar piece as William Carlos Williams's red wheelbarrow poem (which I'm surprised to find him referring to here) begins with the lines “So much depends...” That's not a description of anything. Rather it's a mysterious, vague, and in the end somewhat annoying expression of concern and “care.” It refers to contingencies about which we know nothing. This is what gives an emotional tenor to the poem and makes us take a closer look at that famous wheelbarrow.

Poetry as religion. That part I can believe in. To my mind such a religion is fed by a faith, not in a savior or a creed, but in the continuing power of day-to-day experience to buoy us up; in the continuing power of our personal relations to warm us; and in a continuing obligation to bring a little light into the world ourselves, rather than to drag things down.

I'm enjoying the chill air, though I'll be running inside for more wraps soon. The sun is 20 degrees above the horizon, light is coming in slant-wise through the trees. All I hear is the rustle of leaves, the garage door slamming, and the sound of foot-steps coming up the stairs to the deck. Hilary is

touching up the paint on the glazing of the windows we washed a little carelessly yesterday.

Poetry is an attempt to do homage to experience, to convey the pitch of excitement brought upon us by a beautiful fall morning. “Dry light is ever the best,” as Heraclitus says. I don’t recall being thrown into ecstasies by the low gray clouds we were in the midst of during most of the week, yet we enjoyed those moody days too. Took pleasure in the occasional break in the clouds and the surprising appearance of stars.



We’ve taken one final canoe ride around the lake. I waved at the fisherman in the pontoon boat moving slowly past us in the distance—the only other boat in view. In fact, we waved simultaneously. A mute sign of greeting and respect, no undue shouting or feigned curiosity or “bonhomie.” A perfect wave, I thought.

Earlier this morning, while we were sitting on the dock, a kingfisher came barreling by along the shore. I think he was surprised to see us sitting there. He stopped short momentarily in mid-air, performing an almost hummingbird-like maneuver, and then whizzed by behind our heads.

It has not been a great week for birding. Many, many myrtles and palm warblers. One common yellowthroat. A brown creeper, red-breasted and white-breasted nuthatches, red-breasted mergansers. Swainson’s thrush. Herons. Loons. Eagles. Flickers. Lots of sandhill cranes at Crex Meadows. Two swans. (Don’t ask me which kind!) In short, the usual suspects. Perhaps more bluejays than we’re used to seeing. Cedar waxwings.

I saw a ruby-crowned kinglet yesterday. And just now, thinking that I ought to devote a little more attention to these nondescript passing warblers, I put my binoculars to my eyes and honed in on a golden-crowned kinglet! I haven’t seen one of those in years.

It’s interesting to note—back to Plato’s *Laches*—that the comments made by Laches, Nicias, and the others seem like genuine conversation, even though the ideas they advance are not always

sound. But when Socrates takes over, the flavor of the conversation becomes drier and less appealing. For example, his attempt to bring his friends to recognize that what they’re looking for is not a military expert, but an *educational* consultant, do not make for fascinating reading. Behind it all is the notion, very dear to Plato, that knowledge is goodness. Yet it’s easy to envision a individual who is both learned and wicked. Just as often, and perhaps with greater insight, goodness is associated with naïveté. Consider Dostoyevsky’s *Idiot* and Jerzy Kosinski’s *Chance the gardener* (neither of which I have read, I must admit.)

At one point Socrates suggests that bravery is a part of goodness, but I think maybe it’s the other way around. Maybe goodness is a part of bravery. It’s the attitude with which we forge ahead into an uncertain future, directing our energies toward the expansion of anything and everything that’s rich and beautiful and lively. Making a clearing in the wilderness, and at the same time acknowledging and appreciating the wilderness for what it is—the spring from which all good things flow.

Well that’s a bit grandiose, don’t you think? Yes, I can hear you chuckling. “Oh, brother! Sitting on a dock on a lake, eating waffles in the morning and grilling lamb chops at night, reading, napping, and looking at birds—that’s not wilderness!” No, it’s both the clearing *and* the wilderness. A clearing of time that we cut into the brambles of our daily life, to remind ourselves who we are and what we used to think about. We may bring our attention to bear on the sun, the wind, the stars. No pattern. No agenda. Down to the lake, up to the porch. Passing moments that might even begin to expose the wilderness within ourselves.