

INTRODUCTION

The first Sedgewick Lecture was given in 1955, six years after Dr. Sedgewick's death. Since then, the lecture has been given (almost) annually and has featured many leading scholars, including most recently, Jonathan Gil Harris, Deborah Cameron, and Fred Wah. In 2015, the lecture was given by Stephen Burt of Harvard University.

The lectures are named after Garnett G. Sedgewick, the first head of the Department of English at the University of British Columbia. Dr. Sedgewick was hired by UBC in 1918 and became head in 1920; he served as head until 1948. He laid the foundation for the department and presided over the beginnings of its rapid expansion after World War II. Dr. Sedgewick was also a noted Shakespearean, an acclaimed teacher, and a columnist in the *Vancouver Sun*.

In 2015, we were very fortunate to have Stephen Burt as the Sedgewick Lecturer. Dr. Burt is professor of English at Harvard University, where he specializes in contemporary poetry and poetics. He also has interests in the contemporary arts more generally. He has published widely in these fields. His most notable books are perhaps *The Art of the Sonnet* (co-written with David Mikics) and *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry*.

As well as establishing himself as one of the most consistently interesting and perceptive critics of new and frequently experimental American poetry, Dr. Burt is a distinguished poet in his own right. He also publishes in a variety of venues on comics, graphic novels, science fiction, music, and increasingly on gender. In all these areas, he has used his considerable intellect and his distinctive style to great effect and has established an idiosyncratic and valuable voice. His Sedgewick Lecture was a wide-ranging and entertaining look at a

number of issues in contemporary poetry and was a great hit with everyone.

Dr. Burt was suggested for the lecture by my colleague Stephen Partridge and by his wife Elise Partridge, who was herself a very successful poet. I am sorry to report that Elise died before the lecture. Fittingly, Dr. Burt dealt with some of her poems in his lecture. I would like to dedicate this book to her memory.

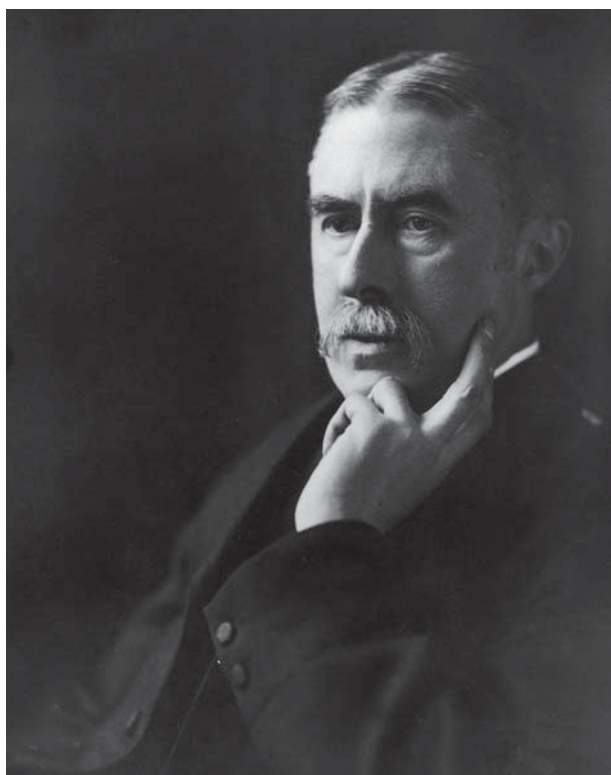
— Stephen Guy-Bray
Professor and Head

FROM THERE: SOME THOUGHTS
ON POETRY & PLACE

Those of us who study poetry have got used to hearing — some of us have even got used to saying — that poetry, or lyric poetry, or modern lyric poetry, imagines a speaking self outside space and time: that while you are reading a poem, it does not matter who or where you are. In lyric, writes Helen Vendler, “the human being becomes a set of warring passions independent of time and space. . . . Insofar as the typical lyric exists only in the here and now it exists nowhere” (5). The soul or the self or the “I” in lyric poetry must turn its circumstances and its worldly origins into trope, or cast them aside: that is what Allen Grossman appeared to mean when he wrote that “the artistic gesture must be deparicularized in order to obtain its efficacy *for another*” (267–68). And it is what W. B. Yeats appeared to mean when he wrote, “All that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt,” for transport, as it were, away from its point of origin in time and space (*Essays* 509). To Brian Boyd, “Lyric poetry allows us the illusion of access to another’s thought at its least constrained by circumstance, in the very act of appealing to others regardless of *their* circumstances” (29). The contemporary poet and essayist Dan Beachy-Quick agrees: for him, “the poem functions on the page as a location that ceases to be a location. The poem on the page . . . does not make a distinct place *in* the world, nor does it make a distinct place *of* the world” (7).

Famous poems throughout the history of English (and not only English) also appear to insist on their own independence from time and space, hence from place, from any really existing environment. Think of Shakespeare: “So long as men can breathe, or eyes

can see,/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.” Think of Richard Lovelace’s most often quoted poem, “To Althea, From Prison,” where “Stone walls do not a prison make,/ Nor iron bars a cage”: the poetic spirit sings freely from any, or from no place. Think of A. E. Housman, whose thoroughly traditional (and immediately, enduringly popular) lyric poems insist on their commonality with readers across time and space: “Others, I am not the first,/ Have willed more mischief than they durst:/ If in the breathless night I too/ Shiver now, ’tis nothing new” (47) (I will come back to Housman). Think of Adrienne Rich’s anthology piece “Power,” in which the poem itself and the wisdom the poem brings — “Her wounds came from the same source as her power” — are like a glass bottle, a message in a bottle, recovered at least decades after it was lost (33). Or think of



A. E. Housman (1859–1936)

Walt Whitman (to whom I will also return) declaring “It avails not neither time or place — distance avails not” (308). Whitman is always promising to reach you, his anointed reader, across time and space, and in that promise (however grandly unusual his other promises) he is hardly alone.

And yet when we start looking for claims — in poems and in prose — about lyric poems’ independence from time and space we can find the opposite claims too, and pretty easily, whether we look in the Renaissance, or in the nineteenth century, or among modernists, or right now. Rich’s poem “Power” envisions that message from Curie, or the message about Curie, recovered by a backhoe, digging into the Earth. Rich’s even more famous poem “Diving Into the Wreck” requires us to imagine a site underwater: “I came to explore the wreck. . . . The words are maps” (15). It is poetry as archaeology, a model if not a method that resonates with such partisans of literal site-specificity as Charles Olson, whose Gloucester poems Rich certainly knew, and with contemporary poets as distant from Olson methodologically as Seamus Heaney and Stanley Kunitz (as in Kunitz’s poem “The Layers”). One of Housman’s best poems tells us that he and you and I and a Roman soldier have felt the same way, that the most basic units of feeling are independent of history, but it can only come to that conclusion — Housman only experiences that solidarity as an intuitively right conclusion — because Housman’s Shropshire lad and his Roman soldier have been standing in and contemplating the same place:

Then, ’twas before my time, the Roman
At yonder heaving hill would stare:
The blood that warms an English yeoman,
The thoughts that hurt him, they were there.

There, like the wind through woods in riot,
Through him the gale of life blew high;
The tree of man was never quiet:
Then ’twas the Roman, now ’tis I. (48)

That famous line of Whitman's about how time and place do not matter comes from a poem whose place surely does matter, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry": "Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt" (309).

Theorists of poetry, too — including lyric poetry, whatever the term means to each theorist who uses it — have often said that the best poems preserve connections to real places where people can live. We expect those sorts of claims from Olson, and from Olson's friend Robert Creeley, who wrote in 1962: "No matter what becomes of it, art is local, local to a place and to a person, or group of persons. . . . It happens somewhere, not everywhere" (484). We expect such claims as well from William Carlos Williams: "From the shapes of men's lives imparted by the places where they have experience, good writing springs" (*Selected Essays* 132). Williams kept trying to prove as much in his own poems, too: "Spirit of place rises from these ashes/ repeating secretly an obscure refrain:// This is my house and here I live" (*Collected Poems Volume I*, 461).

And yet it would be a terrific mistake to ascribe an interest in place, in site, in location as a ground for lyric poetry, only to the so-called New Americans, to moderns who wanted to follow (or who were) Williams, or to the contemporary poets — from Daphne Marlatt in Vancouver to the wonderful Ian Wedde in Auckland — who fashioned their poetry in those modernists' image. It was W. H. Auden who wrote that poets "hope to be, / like some valley cheese, / local, but prized elsewhere" (353). Where would T. S. Eliot be without his "certain half-deserted streets," without the London (not to mention "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria") whose streets and churches inform *The Waste Land*, or without the locales around which he built *Four Quartets*? You can turn almost anywhere in the last two centuries and find the idea — I quote the English poet and critic Neil Powell, whose sympathies are certainly not New American — that "culture, and literary culture especially, depends on local roots; as in gardening, these roots are transplantable with care, but they mustn't be . . . completely severed" (7). Henry Wadsworth Longfellow spent



T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)

his last decade compiling a mammoth anthology — it ran to thirty-one volumes — called *Poems of Places*, aspiring to reprint, in English, some piece of verse about every location on Earth. “In Longfellow’s collection,” writes his best critic, Christoph Irmscher, “places are texts and can be accessed by anyone who is capable of turning the page” (202). You can find a similar endeavor today, on the Internet, thanks to the intrepid editors of poetryatlas.com: “Everywhere on Earth has a poem written about it,” the landing page contends. “We collect any poem written about a place, whether by great poets, or by you.”

This aspiration to cover the world with poetry, or if you prefer to honor its diversity of locales, goes back a very long way. Poems