Gordon Williams:

> The [Greek] lyric poets wrote their poems for performance on specific social occasions like drinking-parties, celebrations of various sorts such as that held for a returning victor at the games, hymns to be sung at temples during religious festivals, and many more. . . . In all this, an account could be given of poetic activity which related the poet directly to the society in which he lived. But gradually, during the fourth and third centuries, the social occasions which, by their very nature, instigated poetic activity, died away and a new phenomenon appeared: the scholar-poet who worked as a literary expert in a great library like that at Alexandria and wrote poetry as a mere part of his activity. These poets took a step which was decisive for later poetry: they continued to write the same sort of poetry as earlier poets had done, but, instead of having real social occasions for which their poems were designed, they treated the occasions as part of the imaginative structure of their poems. So they wrote hymns without any thought of a religious performance; they wrote drinking-songs without parties in prospect; they wrote epitaphs without any idea of having them inscribed on a tombstone.

Everything we now know as lyric—including the ways we (mis)read the poetry that was composed *before* the fourth century—has been decisively defined by this turn of Hellenistic poetry.[18] What we call lyric poetry is literature, something whose detachment from context is, in a manner of speaking, its foundation. Contextlessness is different from detachment from context, and our poems live in the latter mode, finding their "occasions," as Williams writes, "as part of the imaginative structure" of the works themselves. This detachment from context, then, has become constitutive of the modern lyric, which is also the inheritor of many other such detachments, like the separation of lyric from music, and from voice

ing point (Paz, Trotter); some would point to the spread of or, earlier, the invention of printed texts; others propose that poems lost their context once and for all when, after the troubadours and certain poets in the Petrarchan tradition, poetry and music parted ways for good. I am persuaded that the most significant of these points where poetry came unstuck from context was in fourth-century Greece (see also W. R. Johnson 5), but it is possible that things would look different if we knew more about archaic and classical Greek lyric performance than the little we do know. In any case, I do not mean to encourage nostalgia as for an unfallen moment; on the contrary, everything I say in this book is happily enabled by the artistically fruitful uncertainties and ambiguities made possible by poetry's detachment from context (whether we regard that detachment historically or structurally).

18. The sustained and passionate argument about our misreading of earlier Greek poetry by taking it as "poetry," instead of as an utterance that *was* deeply embedded in a specific context of use, is Dupont's book *The Invention of Literature*. Dupont also urges a renewed emphasis on performance in contemporary poetry as a means of reconnecting poetry to music and to a social (communal) situation of utterance.

altogether, and the distances that print publication introduced between handwriting and the book held by a reader.[19]

The strange result of this history of repeated, accumulating dislocations is that poetry is, of all the ways we use language, the one with the most tenuous relation to a context of use.[20] Since any language communicates only by more or less explicit reliance on its context of use, poetry, to the extent that it is decontextualized language, is at risk of not being able to communicate its intended meaning, or, in extreme cases, anything at all. With this risk, however, is purchased a wild charge. Poetry can flame out, unexpectedly.

Pragmatics, the branch of linguistics that studies how language and its context of use interpenetrate, is for these reasons limited in its ability to characterize the lyric. For example, a pragmatic analysis of any utterance will want to know first who is speaking to whom, in what situation, with what bystanders present: these elements have shaped the form of the utterance itself, rather than being concerns outside the linguistic datum, and they constrain interpretation decisively. But these elementary questions about context are just those that, in the case of most poems, we cannot answer. At the opening of Galway Kinnell's poem "Wait" (127), we read:

> Wait, for now.
> Distrust everything if you have to.
> But trust the hours. Haven't they
> carried you everywhere, up to now?

Who is speaking to whom here? Are you, the reader, the one addressed? What kind of situation has occasioned the exhortation to "wait," or the talk of distrust? The poem continues, and readers may infer some answers to these questions from the rest of the text, which I give here in full:

19. Susan Stewart argues that "the notion of poetic *kinds* is tied to the specificity of their use and occasion: the epithalamion, the elegy, the aubade are at once works of art independent of their particular contexts of production and use and social acts tied to specific rules of decorum." Other kinds (ballads, pastorals, meditations) may be less clear as to what Stewart calls "social intent and consequence," but she is still right about the double aspect of poems as social acts and as "things in a world of things" (27).

20. Should we consider a text's publication as poetry to be itself a complete context of use? It is true that genre conventions are an inextricable part of any utterance's pragmatic functioning. But almost all poems refer to or presuppose contexts that are different from, or ambiguously different from, the reading context. This thin relation of a text to its own acts of deixis and presupposition is a signal part of how poetry works on us.

WAIT

Wait, for now.
Distrust everything if you have to.
But trust the hours. Haven't they
carried you everywhere, up to now?
Personal events will become interesting again.
Hair will become interesting.
Pain will become interesting.
Buds that open out of season will become interesting.
Second-hand gloves will become lovely again;
their memories are what give them
the need for other hands. And the desolation
of lovers is the same: that enormous emptiness
carved out of such tiny beings as we are
asks to be filled; the need
for the new love *is* faithfulness to the old.

Wait.
Don't go too early.
You're tired. But everyone's tired.
But no one is tired enough.
Only wait a little and listen:
music of hair,
music of pain,
music of looms weaving all our loves again.
Be there to hear it, it will be the only time,
most of all to hear
the flute of your whole existence,
rehearsed by the sorrows, play itself into total exhaustion.

The addressee of this poem is said to be distrusting, desolate, tired. We ourselves may or may not be that addressee; it depends on our own state of mind during the time of reading. Most readers' first reading of the poem will be in significant part given over to handling the uncertainty of just this question. (Is the implication that as we shift and hesitate, we alternately are, and are not, the one spoken to?)

Many readers will decide at some point—perhaps at "Don't go too early"—that they are overhearing the poem, not hearing it directly, since the line suggests an addressee not just despairing but suicidal. But even among those who react this way, there may be some who, reluctant to conclude that this gentle communication is not meant for them, will endeavor to find another way to interpret "Don't go too early," so preserving the possibility that they are being addressed. (Or they may file the