“And what are poets for in this destitute time?” asks Hölderlin. Heidegger defines destitution as the failure of humans to dwell properly, i.e. to dwell as Mortals, and the answer he gives to Hölderlin’s question is that it is the task of poets to help us to see once more the bright possibilities of dwelling since dwelling to him was by definition dwelling poetically. Dwelling rests in the poetic as the poetic takes the true measure of the world. For H, poetry has an indispensable function and plays a constitutive role in human life.

So, who is a poet? The widest, most generously encompassing but also most essential definition that Heidegger uses of what it means to be a poet is to be someone who “attends singing to the trace of the fugitive gods.” The poet does not bring something new into the world. The poet doesn’t conjure things out of nothing with words, doesn’t make the unholy holy. Poetry is quite simply the saying of the truth that already always exists. Rather than merely describing the appearance of the world, poetry unfolds the world – it is an illuminating projection that opens a clearing in which the world can world, i.e. can disclose itself.

Truth comes about in being composed, as a poet composes a poem. That is why Truth (i.e. the primary unveiling of truth – as veiled) can only happen within the realm of Art and Poetry and not in Science, whose role is that of the secondary, confirming, servant of Truth.

All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry. But poetry, in the narrower, linguistic sense, has a privileged position according to Heidegger. Language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open. In the words of Iris Murdoch: “There is no doubt which art is the most practically important for our survival and our salvation, and that is literature. Words constitute the ultimate texture and stuff of our moral being, since they are the most refined and delicate and detailed, as well as the most universally used and understood, of the symbolisms whereby we express ourselves into existence. We
became spiritual animals when we became verbal animals. The fundamental distinctions can only be made in words. Words are spirit.”

Or Andrew O’Hagan: “The world of Wessex was a thing of language, and it wasn’t borne on air or planted with trees but fully figured by the mind of the writer, in words and images. In some sense, great poets are the landscape they magic into being. The place isn’t quite there – not imaginatively – without them. Wordsworth carries the Lakes, Emily Brontë carries Yorkshire, Heaney is Ireland and Pope is the difficult London of his day.”

Robert Macfarlane has arrived at the notion that verbal representation stands in a sacramental relationship to the world. He sees words as verbal icons through which the world is not merely represented, but through which it actually presences.

Another way of seeing the relationship between words and world is that poetry can be said to have magical and shamanic aspects. There is an ancient relationship between poetic imagination and shamanism, something the bardic tradition kept alive for a very long time.

The relationship between words and world is both generative and redemptive. The narratives that we construct about our world and ourselves play a role in the making-real of a place. Or, simply, in the making of place. Our narratives influence how we see and treat things. Including spaces. George Lakoff’s The Political Mind (2008) delved into the ways in which language frames the message. A frame is a set of concepts that when put together activate a certain interpretation of the world. The words we choose activate entire world views; they influence our perceptions as well as our actions.

If we are agreed that there is such a thing as sacred space, i.e. space that is qualitatively and essentially different from non-sacred space, it follows, it seems to me, that the writing about sacred space needs to be as different from the writing about non-sacred space as the two types of space are one from the other. There needs to be a proper relationship between the described and the description. Just as sacred architecture transcends its material aspect, the account of it ought to transcend an ordinary descriptive account. I would describe the relationship between poetry and sacred architecture thus:

*The image of the temple is folded when viewed conventionally, but the poet unfolds it and spreads it out and only then does it present a pure phenomenological aspect. A space we inhabit and love transcends geometrical space. It deploys and moves elsewhere without difficulty, into other times and onto different planes of dream and memory.* (my book, p. 145)
Ekphrasis.
From the Greek: *ek* (out) *phrasein* (to tell or speak), in other words: the outwardly expressed of the inwardly contained meaning.

Its roots are considered to lie in the Classical, rhetorical tradition – and its origin usually pinpointed to Pausanias and his travelogues. In the 5th century, it started to become associated specifically with art and architecture, specifically sacred art and architecture. Paul the Silentary’s C6 ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia is possibly the first ekphrastic account of a church in the 500s. During the so-called Macedonian renaissance (9th–10th centuries) the ekphrasis came back into fashion with Photios I of Constantinople and Leo VI or “Leo the Wise” being the the two most well-known authors in the 900s, and Nikolaos Mesarites and Michael the Deacon in the 1100s.

Examples of later practitioners are John Ruskin, Walter Pater, William Hazlitt, Stendhal, John Berger, Rolf Wohlin (and yours truly)…

What an ekphrasis is.
It is a type of poetic writing, a sort of prose poetry, that can be used to describe anything as long as it’s a lively telling, i.e. a telling that brings the told alive to the listener. But it is particularly suitable as a narrative form for sacred spaces, as it promotes “seeing with the eyes of the senses in order to understand with the eyes of the spirit” as the C12 writer and Metropolitan Nikolaos Mesarites said.

While the descriptions may not have been accurate or precise enough to give a clear impression of the fabric of the building, or to act as sources for archeology, they give a very accurate idea of how certain buildings were perceived in other times, of their reception and perception, of the perceived significance of the building, of the emotional involvement of the people that formed a part of the history of the place. They convey the experience and the effect of sacred space.

It is a form or rhetoric and an artform. It involves choice of words, rhythm, tone, mood, where to linger, what to mention only in passing, what not at all – considerations familiar to the poet, novelist and short story writer – important in the struggle to convey the essence of the thing itself, rather than a set of facts about the thing.

An ekphrasis also usually includes descriptions of the absent, the unseen, the only dreamed-of, the imagined, the projected, associated, the implicit and tacit, the simultaneity of different realities. As a sacred space is by its very nature allusive and carries references beyond itself, to ultimate mysteries of cosmology and eschatology, an ekphrasis is an apt way to write about it. The point is to make a reader or listener “see”. In the senses both of sight and insight.
A subcategory of the ekphrasis is the periegesis – which means ‘leading around’. A periegesis is a sort of guided tour, and is a particularly suitable type of ekphrasis for a church, as it is, amongst other things, a space of procession.

What an ekphrasis does.
There is always an element of the encomium – it is a loving description. It attempts to describe something on its own terms, at paying loving attention to it; an ekphrasis is a text that points in the same general direction as that which it describes. It can be said to have a parallel function to the work of art or architecture.

An ekphrasis of a work of sacred architecture seeks to:
- celebrate;
- persuade;
- attract;
- redeem dignity;
- prevent further violation.

There is a parallel between the motivations of the Byzantine authors of ekphrases regarding the particular churches they were writing about and my motivations regarding sacred architecture more generally in our own times.

With the various threats facing sacred architecture in our societies, it seems important to hope that poetry and ekphrastic writing might reprise its historic achievements. Churches are increasingly threatened – by physical destruction and alteration on the one hand, and by the more insidious transvaluation into cultural heritage on the other. We need to start presenting sacred space in a very different light from how it is currently (mostly) being presented in order to persuade people of the importance to not ruin its non-material qualities, and hence, ultimately, its very quiddity.

We need to accept our obligation to poem our way back into the mystic.

Poems read during the lecture:
Philip Larkin: Church Going
R.S. Thomas: The Moon in Lleyn
Ted Hughes: Heptonstall Old Church
John Betjeman: Verses turned in the aid of a public inscription towards the restoration of St Katherine Chiselhampton, Oxon; Sunday Morning, King’s Cambridge