

Cowan Archive Seminar Fall 2021: Global Vistas of Lyric

Remarks for the First Session, August 26 – Bainard Cowan

As Melissa wrote in her announcement of this fall's seminar, our offering this fall is another installment in our exploration of the genres as they inform our study of literature and give us new eyes to see the world around us. Having examined tragedy and comedy in the 2019-2020 academic year, we now turn our attention to **lyric** as it is expressed around the globe, keeping these orienting points in mind on our itinerary:

1. Louise Cowan insisted that a **culture** could not be healthy, could not decipher its own feelings, if it did not embrace poetry, the province wherein the **language** of feeling (*language of being*) is refined and tuned.
2. She considered the **loss of poetry** everywhere in our prosaic world of today a devastating **impoverishment of spirit**.
3. While the spirit of lyric utterance **continues**, seemingly limitlessly **adaptable** to its surroundings, its cry testifies not only to the profundity of human **longing** but the devastating condition and **urgent needs** of our culture.

Some Observations based on Louise Cowan's Lecture "The Lyric Imagination"

A key element that makes lyric something not just subjective but meta-subjective: *language*. Language is a kind of covenant people make with one another; carefully considered, it is a miracle. But language is so dedicated to getting things done – and in a business civilization, with getting business done – that we forget that it does anything other than communicate data, or, when it is not doing that, doing something of purely individual value like relieving stress. Whether serenely or desperately, poetry is busy keeping alive the covenantal aspect of language in a time in which people in the privileged side of the world seem determined to break all covenants that have ever existed. Poetry was around to help form the body politic, and now it is reminding all of us that read it that we are a body politic, that we share some human convictions and hold the same capacity for wonder.

The key place that reading lyric poetry occupies in a liberal education, then, is that it informs us of, and celebrates with us, what of our most intimate feelings and convictions we share with others. It accomplishes an "interpenetration between the self and things," in Jacques Maritain's expression. It brings together thought and feeling. It accepts our human failings while bringing them to light for our attempts to go beyond them. It embodies the loftiest and most distant ideals in language that is recognized and admired far and wide. It gives the virtues as well as the vices a tune, as it were, so that we can sing them and know them intimately. As Cowan says of poems,

they are incarnations. The sound and meaning are fused; language has taken on overtones that elicit various levels of existence: it reaches areas of our minds and hearts that other statements do not reach. Each has its own unique being.

Some things to look for in a lyric poem:

tone

form

(difference between structure and form)

(theory of “texture,” of irrelevant or resistant material running counter to the pure utterance, putting irony and realism in service of enlarging the epistemic scope of the poem beyond a single point of view)

Poems for Discussion

What follows is some notes I made to prepare for our discussion of the poems, offered to you now in case they may be helpful.

As life what is so sweet

This sixteenth-century song is quite different from most songs or indeed most lyrics. It wins entry into the category of lyric by being a passionate, heartfelt utterance, yet rather than a cry of love or forlornness it is more like an observation, a phenomenological one even, or part of an argument about life. It gives voice to something we all carry around in the back of our minds, never accessing unless faced with the exact situation. Yet it speaks at the same time of the profound oneness of all creatures, a kind of earthly panspiritualism, and of the insistence with which we all hold on to *this* life.

Have you seen but a white lily grow

(Play video excerpt sung by Kaja Mianowana
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqVxWvnPjnl>)

Comment on Westron Wynde

(Recite this four-line poem)

The surprising end—very personal and intimate, in a *general* sense, reminding us of a shared response to intimacy. The New Critics referred to it more than once as an example of “texture” – the counter element that reverses the pure lyricism of the utterance, in the process making it more “real.”

A more recent consideration by Jonathan Culler:

Apostrophes invoke elements of the universe as potentially responsive forces, which can be asked to act, or to refrain from acting, or even to continue behaving as they usually behave. The key is not passionate intensity, but rather the ritual invocation of elements of the universe, the attempt, even, to evoke the possibility of a magical transformation. This is manifestly central to the tradition of song...

Comment on Full Fathom Five

John Tyree Fain (friend of the Southern Fugitive poets and editor of Donald Davidson's work) wrote in 1968 about this song of Shakespeare's:

The poem is an intricate fabric in which alliteration, assonance, rhyme, and rhythm combine to create a spell, for it is a spell that is required by the plot of *The Tempest*.

...the song does not add to [Ferdinand's] sorrow but mitigates it in a way that a joyful song could not. It takes the mourner from himself by revealing to him his own sad thoughts in stately play of number and form. The soothing power of art lies in this act of transmutation. The mourner does not numb his awareness but is able somehow to *spread* that awareness, to obliterate the intensely personal point of reference. This is one of the things that we mean by art's universalizing power... Ferdinand, aware of [his] sorrow, [is] unaware, let us say, of the process of transmutation. With *our* omniscient perspective in the narrative of *The Tempest*, Ariel's song enables us to contemplate the process of transmutation itself, which takes place on both psychological and ontological levels.

Comments for Sonnet 138, When My Love Swears

Vendler: "[*She*] swears—I do believe her--*I* know—*She* lies [etc.]... The one thing they both *don't* do is *say*."

The one thing both Vendler and Culler don't do is model a natural human response to a poem—more simply, to be human in their response to a poem.

? When Helen and Jonathan do swear they know their poem's truth
I do believe them -- because I want to pass English!

Recalling what Louise Cowan says of poetry, in contrast:

Each asks us to respond to it--and this "grasping" is what is left out of most literary study. Readers begin analyzing a poem (mapping its ideas, its structure) before they grasp it--before they respond to it.

The task of the critic, then, in dealing with one of these unique lyric poems is first of all to respond to it properly--to read it as a complete utterance in itself, a single thing.

So let's go ahead and do that with Shakespeare. And let's not make up our minds too readily without taking his words to heart. Vendler goes on to inform us:

Critical opinion on this sonnet sees it either as a depraved picture of cynical partners or as a sophisticated rendition of the (ultimately comic) way in which all lovers flatter each other

Well, then critics just aren't very good at criticizing, are they? It is not a comedy by Machiavelli or Congreve—it is a lyric! A meditation on many things at once, in a moment in which we get to live or relive the experience of love and by Shakespeare's language are placed in a state of contemplation of the imperfect, chaotic, false, and yet real way of two persons in love. Line 2 is not just an ironic joke but a sounding of our hearts. Our will to self-deception, in order to have love, or not to have to face death, will go to absolute self-contradiction—and accompanying it somehow is the growth of love.

An earlier commentator [Carl D. Atkins] observes that in line 2 “the speaker claims that he believes what he knows to be untrue. This is, of course, not possible, but we understand exactly what he means: part of him believes her and part of him does not. The seeming contradiction is just another way of expressing ambiguity. It is meant to be clever, and I think it is.”

Critics have a hard time because they don't want to appear naïve to other critics. To hold to that resolution, though, they have to betray the poem. Every good poem is in part an act of regression. -- How else do we find in ourselves what “As life what is so sweet” speaks of?

Louise Cowan loved this poem especially because it is immediately intuitable by us, even though it presents what is stated as a sheer logical contradiction. It proves that poetry is a discipline in which, unlike philosophy, x can be equal to $non-x$. And *what* it presents to us is not just the fickleness of reason in the face of love but, on the contrary, the nature of love as belief in something more expansive, truer, if you will, than the factual truth. Such a commitment is love, and this is what Shakespeare examines here.

I ran into a comment the other day by some sort of historian that in some tradition paradoxes were considered places at which spiritual growth was being urged. This to me explains a lot (potentially at least) about the power of the metaphysical conceit. But the growth can be purely intellectual or about human nature as well.

Comments on “I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark”

From a lecture by Louise Cowan on Blake, Hopkins, and Dickinson:

Each of these three wrote verse that challenged the undertaking of modernity—that effort to embrace all knowledge within the empirical model. We could say that Hopkins discerned the holy within things, viewing it as incarnation, the second person of the Trinity; Dickinson saw the intricate creation itself, reflecting the First Person; Blake was a visionary, viewing “heaven in a grain of sand,” seeing the invisible, the imagination, the third person of the trinity. But all three knew that the lyric is itself a mode of searching for truth; and that the truth it finds has some original authenticity that lies behind matter. (I would refer to the passage in Proverbs about the original Wisdom that played along

with God as He created the universe.) We have to remember that those of us who take poetry seriously are never completely in service to fact; we are speaking in terms of aspects of being, which can be reached only analogically and symbolically.)

And she quotes Harold Bloom:

"Of all Victorian poets, Hopkins has been the most misrepresented by modern critics. He has been discussed as if his closest affinities were with Donne on one side and T. S. Eliot on the other. Yet his poetry stems directly from Keats and the Pre-Raphaelites and his thought is more akin to Pater and Ruskin than to twentieth century thought."

She continues:

Like [Blake and Dickinson], Hopkins is what we might call an "isolato." Even though he embraced the Catholic faith and found his spiritual community in the Jesuit order as a priest, he remained essentially solitary. (One of our questions in this course might be: does a lyric poet have to be a lonely person? Certainly in a tribal or folk society he does not. But in a society that is constantly having to be redeemed from routine and brutality, does not the lyric poet have to retrieve language for us out of the abyss of solitude and darkness? Heidegger seems to think so.)

[Hopkins'] sequence ordinarily entitled the "terrible sonnets"... seems most representative of his deep sense of aloneness, wherever he is, in England or Ireland (both of which he loved).

[These poems depict] the spiritual state of a man called to be a poet, knowing the supreme importance of doing his work as a poet, and yet aware of his increasing inability to create---and having no community of poets or readers to complete his work in their own minds and imaginations when he does write. Cut off from family, friends, country, and the faith of his people, and feeling intensely the absence of Christ, his beloved, Hopkins is indeed a "stranger" in a strange land. And yet the relatively small body of poems he kept hidden away in his papers, unread by any except a few friends to whom he mailed them, has in many ways changed the course of English poetry, as one critic has written. Most critics agree that Hopkins is a major poet.

About his poetic language Cowan observed:

Hopkins' direct ancestors, his models, were the early English poets who felt the vigor of the language and wrote in the rough style that characterizes the genius of the English language. Walter Ong points out that it is Spenser who makes the "smooth" style the vogue in English poetry; that the mellifluousness of the Spenserian meter and rhyme clearly dominated the field after the seventeenth century. Donne in his rough style reflects the native genius of English; and it is this character, this integrity that Hopkins sought to revive.

And about the poem printed in our class notes, "I wake and feel the fell of dark":

Fell--the past tense of fall used as a substantive; night has fallen, that terrible dark that will annihilate us, the dark that existed before the creation of light. Fell is also the skin of an animal, related to pelt. The word also means fierce and deadly.

Jackself--The taste of self, see Mariani in Bloom, 57-58.

sweating 58

his nightmare 59

Culler calls attention to Hopkins' use of what he calls the "lyric present" in the first line and throughout, sign that "it happens now, in time, but in an iterable *now* of lyric enunciation, rather than in a now of linear time" (290). So it's the "lyric present," which is often thought of as that trance of timelessness that we fall into when enjoying something immensely. But it's a *negative* present—a sense of menace that won't go away.

Comment for Song of Songs 8

Louise Cowan: "What we see in the ancient poetry of the Israelites is the yearning for wholeness, for that which was lost in the fall--for the primordial blessedness. Hence, we could say, the lyric is the expression of the quest for the garden, for the proper relation between God and man, between love and humankind."

Comments on "In a Dark Time"

There is a short film "In a Dark Time" devoted to Theodore Roethke at the Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.53888>

In it Roethke observes that poems are generally not liked because they tell us we must change our life (he uses the Rilke phrase) or face the darkness in ourselves (something he focused on most).

Comments on "San Sepolcro"

Jorie Graham first published this poem in 1983. Its subject is a *Madonna del parto* ("Madonna of parturition,") an iconic depiction of the Virgin Mary shown as pregnant, which was developed in Italy, mainly in Tuscany in the 14th century. This one is by Piero della Francesca and is considered the most distinguished one of this type. Graham came upon it in a small church, Santa Maria di Momentana, (formerly Santa Maria in Silvis), an old country church in the hill town of Monterchi. The title of the poem, then, is not the name of the church but must refer to the subject of the painting, tying the gestative Infant Jesus to the site that will hold His crucified body. This makes a beautiful analogical symbol, that if womb is tomb then also death is birth into resurrected life; and Hopkins would be there in a flash. Graham's more modern sensibility makes no gesture toward such a completion of the equation.

Fame and an earthquake necessitated the moving of the fresco; it is now in the Museo della Madonna del Parto in Monterchi. The Madonna was portrayed standing, alone, often with a

closed book on her stomach, an allusion to the Incarnate Word. These works were associated with the devotions of pregnant women, praying for a safe delivery.

(Show file [Piero Madonna del parto.jpg](#))

The tent in the fresco has been interpreted to represent the Ark of the Covenant or, for Christians, the Church, and the Madonna would symbolize the tabernacle, as she is portrayed containing Jesus' body.

Literary scholars have suggested the poem explores the paradoxicality of thresholds, of frames, of ekphrasis. Writes Jordan Tracy:

The most prominent opening on the dress appears in the front along the center of her womb; however, there is another opening along her left side, which revises [the] interpretation that the fresco is a revelation of expectant life. These tears in the garment may be read in terms of the violent opening up of the laboring female body, but they also are figures of the yet unborn Christ's future crucifixion wounds.

...Neither exclusively the domain of the sacred nor the realm of the profane, the threshold is a liminal space like those explored by anthropologist Victor Turner.... The Virgin is in a state of being "betwixt and between" herself. Like Turner's initiates, she is "neither one thing nor another."

For this reason, the viewer is entranced by the invitation to enter her bodice, anxious about the violence inherent in that entrance, and uncertain concerning the repercussions of such a violation. Generally, the "liminal anxiety" that transpires in the threshold is meant to obstruct any passage completely—as in the Jewish Tabernacle or Temple—or momentarily—as in myth and romance.

Tracy's discussion ends in observing further:

Graham's work considers this Logos a "stillborn" "tragedy." The ekphrastic project, though, does not aim to arrive at this fatalistic end in spite of the number of thresholds, frames, and passages that appear throughout its lines. The entrance to such a space has no end. As a consequence, the conventionally conceived encounter with a sacred other is perpetually deferred. In place of this encounter is an ambiguously erotic process of unbuttoning that happens on the threshold that is the Virgin's body as well as on the threshold that is the body of the poem."