The Role of Poetry in Our Time

Louise Cowan

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What Comes After Modernism? The Role of Poetry in our Time

Louise Cowan

Georg Lukacs has warned us: “Modernism leads not only to the destruction of literary forms; it leads to the destruction of literature as such. It means not the enrichment but the destruction of art.”

And indeed, in what has been vaguely called “postmodernism” there are tendencies that seem to validate Lukacs’s pessimistic prophecy. The energy in this development has been devoted to making art not about life but about itself; its concern has been more with ideology than with poetry. Its emphasis has been on skepticism, deconstruction; a general deprivilegng of literature; it has had an irreducible political dimension, with a critique of domination; a focus on power; emphasis on the social and ideological production of meaning, with culture seen as effect rather than source.

These epistemological and stylistic characteristics could be said to represent the last gasp of modernism, a turning of the techniques of modernity against itself: irony, skepticism, menippea, parody, nihilism—all the tools of doubt. The dominant voice in theory sounds a loud distrust of the entire literary tradition that has gone before.

That skepticism was first voiced by a few perceptive writers in the nineteenth century. “Europe is a graveyard,” Ivan Karamazov says to his brother Alyosha; “but it is a precious graveyeard.” And later, Alyosha, heartened by Ivan’s admission of love for “some things,” cries out, “There; you have already admitted loving; now you have only to raise up your dead.” This might be the rallying cry for the movement in the early part of this century that we call modernism, which tried vainly to resurrect the gods (see Pound and Eliot). In the face of their failure, the new turn in poetry, it seems, will follow in the lead of those 20th century writers who, not taking the path of the intellectual elite, drew upon elements from an oral culture. Robert Frost, Donald Davidson, the Irish poets, the Eastern Europeans, the Caribbean poets—all these
followed a different path.

The modernist movement, inaugurated by a poetic revolution taking place in the second and third decades of this century—the 1910's and the 1920's—was a literary phenomenon of a scope and quality not encountered, I would maintain, ever before in history—not even when England was thought of as a "nest of singing birds" in the Renaissance. It was a revolution that altered our consciousness; and actually what the poets writing at that time set out to do they have accomplished—though not in the way they hoped. They did not restore a past; they did not turn our society away from science; they did not defeat industrialism; they did not reclaim a myth. But their sifting of values, their intense scrutiny of the cosmos, with the human person at its center, their radically new mode of thought—altered science and technology, transformed consciousness, changing the basic way of seeing and knowing that had been ushered in three centuries earlier by modernity.

Now what is interesting is to see how much the situation of science has changed since the early 20th century; science—the enemy of poets, as these poets thought—itself has become more poetic, less wedded to the "fact." The great burst of creative energy in physics occurred just after World War I, only a slight bit later than the poetic revolution that is usually called Modernist. Physics too began to work with images, new forms that were not mechanical; it too enlarged its view to include mystery. The deterministic, clock-work universe of modernity began slowly to disappear. Did the widespread revolution in seeing effected by the poets have anything to do with the scientist's changing view of the universe? One might conceivably think so. But at any rate, what happened in the second decade of the 20th century is nothing short of an epistemological and ontological revolution that manifested itself first in poetry and then in the other arts and sciences: a new way of thinking and a new concept of being.

Einstein’s theory of relativity again made any single point the center of the world; Heisenberg’s uncertainty theory gave legitimacy to point of view; chaos theory verified what poets have known ever since the Odyssey and Shakespeare’s Tempest; self organizing structures seemedto authenticate Coleridge’s idea of organic form; name some others . . .

This period shares with the 17th century the distinction of being one of the great ages of the lyric in English—and for variety, scope, philosophic depth, and intensity, perhaps unmatched. What does it mean—all this furious writing activity throughout Western culture? I am proposing
that it meant an awareness on the part of people called to work with language that a way of life was disappearing. And like the OT prophets, they were called to warn, upbraid, or tell the melancholy tale.

One of the effects of modernity had been to limit the term poetry to the lyric. The lyric has had to bear the responsibility for representing poetry during the last few centuries; for what the age of the mass-produced book has done is to separate poetry from narrative and from drama. Hence, when people today speak of a poem they are referring to the short lyrical utterance that we have come to think of as a kind of uninhibited free-flowing self expression—the short lyric. And yet those of us in literature certainly know that Shakespeare wrote his plays in poetry, as did Sophocles and Aeschylus, Aristophanes and Euripides; that Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton wrote their long epics in forms full of imagery and other poetic devices—that in fact until the 17th century the word poetry meant all fictional works—the works that the whole Western world thought of as mimetic as distinct from rhetorical, or dialectical (or expository) composition.

It was always recognized that the lyrical utterance (the dithyramb, the ode, the elegy, the canzone) was more highly poetical in sound, being closer to music, and closer to the spontaneous impulses of feeling among the community. But the term poem was not exclusive to it, nor should it be so with us today: for the only way we shall be able to restore the formed word that is the image of the human is by recognizing the larger sense of the word poiesis, or the Latin fictio, something made in language. The Iliad is a poem, Hamlet is a poem, Moby Dick is a poem, Pulp Fiction and American Beauty are poems.

But the lyric is a specific kind of poem in its own right. The language of poetry, having been driven out of court in narrative and drama, has burgeoned even more fully in the 20th century lyric. It thus exhibits most clearly since the 19th century Romantics all the elements that have seemed endangered in an age of rationalism. Literary criticism in the 20th century has centered on the lyric, since perhaps any serious defense of poetry must rest its case with the lyric (as being the most purely poetic of the genres—and therefore perhaps the most representative of the health of literature).

The lyric is at the peak of mortal experience, its fictional site the locus within which human nature meets the darkness of unknowing: the primordial place prior to myth. This is the source of all thinking and feeling, communal in the sense that each person not only is connected to
the whole human race, but that each is the human race. So what seems the single lyric voice in the poem is really the voice of the community: "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?" or "Westron wynd, when wilt thou blow?" or even "Whenas in silks my Julia goes . . ."

Myth has its origins in the lyric. Myth is of course a cultural construction and hence “not true” in the literal sense, though of course it is the height of truth in another way, since it embodies a communal response to a sense of calling among people who come together to work out their destiny. Human beings "create" myth, then, in that it is a communal word which they speak freely in their depths; and all their thinking, their arts, their culture, reflect that logos. The Dostoevsky quotation. But the originary word was spoken to them by some sort of revelation. And by poiesis, by mythopoiesis, they make something of their lives, their community, their tradition though their myth. All these making acts take place at the center of human consciousness—where the lyric abides. All three stages of action are here: the anticipation, making the way ready; the consummation: the true presence of the beloved or of blessedness in the community: the making of the myth --"and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (This is what takes place in Donne's love poetry: "You to whom love was peace that now is rage . . .beg from above a pattern of your love," And then the loss of the garden: lamentations, elegiac grieving, mourning: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down . . .we hanged our harps on the willows thereof . . . and they take us captive required of us song. How can we sing the lord's songs in a strange land?"

It was the 19th century Romantics upon whom the realization dawned: when we lose poetry and its way of viewing the world, we lose our humanity. A bit later, Matthew Arnold might be said first to characterize the modern condition in his essay "The Study of Poetry". The future of poetry is immense, he tells us, and it is in poetry that the human race will find an ever surer stay. We have placed our faith in the fact, and the fact has failed us. Fact has destroyed our religion, our myths, our concept of virtue; but, he tells us, poetry will restore these things to us because, as he says, "the instinct for self-preservation in humanity" will cause a turn to poetry."

This is the same person who, as poet, wrote the darkly despairing "Dover Beach," which tells us at the end,

. . . the world that seems/ to lie before like a land of dreams/ So various, so beautiful, so new/ Hath really neither joy nor love nor light/ Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;/ And we are here as on a darkling plain/ Swept with
confused alarms of struggle and flight /Where ignorant armies clash by night.

A half century later I A Richards, the British psychologist-critic, began his famous essay "Science and Poetry" with this passage from Arnold's essay, to which he replies:
"Man's prospects are not at present so rosy that he can neglect any means of improving them." But rather than the future of poetry appearing immense, as Arnold had said, he suggests that it might be a more representative view to say that its future appears nil. Scientific thinking appears to have made poetry impossible for early 20th century society. It had "neutralized" nature--that is, removed from it its sense of sacredness, denuded it of its presences ("All things are full of gods," as the Ionian philosopher said. "Turn but a stone and start a wing," as Francis Thompson wrote; "the world is charged with the grandeur of God/ It will flame out, like shining from shook foil," as Gerard Manley Hopkins declared.) But mechanical science had shown the 20th century a world that is only a collocation of atoms, ceaselessly and meaninglessly whirling in a universe that is both too large and too small for us. The Magical View of the world had been irrevocably lost, Richards assured us; and though our intellects could not be satisfied with that old view of the world, still "what gave it its standing was the ease and adequacy with which the universe therein presented could be emotionally handled, the scope offered for man's love and hatred, for his terror as well as for his hope and his despair. It gave life a shape, a sharpness, and a coherence that no other means could so easily secure."

Eliot's Waste Land, with its portrayal of loss and desiccation that dominated the literary mind for more than two decades, appeared shortly before Richards’ essay. “April is the cruellest month . . . feeding a little life with dried tubers.” And Allen Tate’s “What shall we do who have knowledge carried to the heart?” voiced the great question of poets and critics, along with their increasing number of serious readers. For the poetic revolution of the early 20th century, like the revolution in the other arts at about the same time, was a brilliant flare-up not only against Victorian bourgeois optimism, progress, scientific technology--but against modernity itself, that world view that began in the 17th century. These modernist poets made an attempt, using the techniques of what T. E. Hulme called "hard, dry language and sharp images" to revive the mythic method, the symbol, to turn away from the representational toward the inner significance of objects. Pound and Eliot were the leaders in this method; but they were preceded by Yeats and Frost and accompanied by Stevens, W. C. Williams, D. h. Lawrence, H. D. Marianne Moore, Ransom, Tate, and tens of others. Most of these writers attempted to reanimate the world, to restore the sense of the sacred. Most of them found their inspiration--and their symbol systems in
another age: Yeats--ancient Ireland, the occult; Lawrence--the primitive; Pound--the troubadours and the dolce stil nuovo poets; Eliot--Dante; Ransom--Spenser and the Old South; Tate--Virgil, medieval Xianity.

Only Stevens and Frost among these major poets of modernism placed themselves firmly in their own day without recourse to an earlier, more blessed time; and only they refused to believe in a spiritual world beyond this one, though they both longed for it. But since everything the modernist opposed was expressed by the linear thought that had dominated the last three centuries (analysis, logic, ideology, moralizing--the daylight world), their poetry in its search for wholeness focused on the image: (The image, as Kermode had suggested had to take the place of myth)

In a station of the metro: “The apparition of these faces in the crowd/ Petals on a black, wet bough.”

‘So much depends/upon/a red wheel/barrow/glazed with rain/water/beside the white/chickens.’

Bavarian Gentians, big and dark, only dark
darkening the daytime, torchlike with the smoking blueness of Pluto's gloom
ribbed and torchlike, with their blaze of darkness spread blue
down flattening into points, flattened under the sweep of white day/ torchflower of the bluesmoking darkness. Pluto's darkblue daze/ black lamps from the halls of Dis, burning dark blue, giving off darkness, blue darkness, as Demeter's pale lamps give off light/ lead me then, lead the way.

—and though the effect produced is brilliant, the scope is somewhat limited. Modernism gave rise to what Donald Davidson castigated as “the guarded style”—guarded against science and the rationalism that accompanied that discipline in its Newtonian guise. Davidson would be inclined to agree with Lukacs that modernism marked the end not only of literary forms but of literature itself.

Many of the ills in our society can be attributed to the lack of poetry in our educational systems and our daily lives. All the fictional genres, expressed in various media, are poetry; as
we have said, and all, as Aristotle put it, are truer than history (truer than fact) because they indicate not what has happened but what ought to happen. Fictions can indicate what ought to happen because they discover the laws of the human psyche.

If we have turned to psychology as the formative principle for our educational structures—after the domination of history in the curriculum for the first two centuries of modernity, followed by that of science for the next hundred years—many of us consider the new emphasis an improvement. But we have still not come as close as we can come to the human things that should be the basis of education—and of any people’s thought about themselves. What the other disciplines need in their lives as a little bit of leavening is poetry—poetry, not as we use the word in our day (as short lyric pieces) but as the ancients used it: for all imaginative works, all fictions, all things made in words (poiesis).

For poetry, as Aristotle first said, has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It has a story, a plot, a mythos. It depicts character (ethos); These are the two chief elements; the others, dianoia, lexis, melos, opsis, enter less spectacularly into the shaping of thought, though they are certainly present in any poetic utterance; and when they do not exercise their influence on a culture, their absence keenly felt.

But it is the fictional aspect of poetry (the imitation of an action) and its emphasis on story that give it preeminent place in our thought. For, like laboratory science, it turns the working out of certain principles and laws over to a process that is not subject to prejudice; and like science, its real aim is discovery. Poetry has always scandalized; it has always told its audience something they did not—and sometimes did not wish to—know; an individual poetic discovery continues, however, unlike science, to make its revelations in ages later and farther removed than its own. Oedipus Rex is still as generative of new thought as it must have been in the fifth century B. C. Aristotle’s physics, however, is interesting only to philosophers or to historians of science—not to the general reader or the practitioner of the discipline of physics.

How does poetry acquire its ability to speak across the ages? And why is the knowledge it bestows a necessary knowledge?

First, it speaks in timeless symbols; symbols that, being based on the image, weld together matter and spirit. Consider the white whale in Moby Dick; the bear in Go Down Moses, the nightingale in Keat’s Ode.
Poetry, as Aristotle has told us, is truer than history; by which he means truer than fact. For if history tells us what happened, poetry tells us what ought to happen: what will happen in principle when certain human laws are either obeyed or ignored. Look at Macbeth. Look at the Bacchae. Look at the story of Guido da Montefeltro in the Divine Comedy.

Poetry is as essential to the human race as food, or love, or faith. People are not fully human without it. Ours is the only nation that has tried to live without it; and it manifests itself nevertheless in strange and persistent ways: films, tv, music; elephant dung on madonnas, guns in classrooms. . . .

I am concerned then not simply with "The Value of Poetry," or its desirability, but with its necessity. Poetry has always been the basis of culture—and by culture I mean the way in which we live our lives—not simply what we think, but how we feel and what we do. Culture: this fragile construction we build not solely for use but for aesthetic pleasure; our ability to give form to functions, to endow use with grace, to make pattern out of routine—these are graces that demonstrate our respect for each other, our celebration of what it is to be human. The arts of course are the fine flower of any cultural manifestation; and poetry is basic to all the arts.

The other disciplines normally come later, after one has found, within oneself, the right order of the human heart. Culture itself in former days provided an education in poetry: tales, images, myths, symbols—these made up the formation of the person before the process of formal education had begun. In traditional societies it was not so necessary to teach literature, since people were already formed in the poetic way of thinking by the time they began any sort of formal education.

But we have moved away from the village culture that has sustained society for millennia; families are no longer repositories of memory, neighborhoods are no longer centers of festivity. People no longer read or recite the great traditional poetic texts. Yet the need for poetry persists. And the hunger for it is to be found not only in the individual psyche; but in the large order of society itself, which is made into a unity by the affective bonds generated by the poetic imagination. When societies are no longer in touch with the forgotten springs of their communal life—when the public trust is daily violated and universal probity cast aside; when reverence or respect fails to halt the violent hand of the aggressor; when legalism is expected to take over the task of ethics and courtesy—a society is dangerously close to barbarism. Under these conditions, it is approaching a point from which return is likely to prove quite difficult if not impossible. Under these conditions, it would seem, to suggest that such a state of disorder can be remedied by poetry is to run the risk of dismissal.
In our day, then, with the situation sp radically changed, literature must be taught. For, far from being a luxury for an elite, poetry is formative of the fundamental way in which bodies of people conceive of themselves as a community. Values passed on from generation to generation (the public virtues of the city and the private sacralities of the home) stem not so much from conscious rational beliefs per se as from the poetic imagination. As well as providing stories and images of the virtues, poetry makes a linguistic image of the obscure fears and aspirations hidden within the communal psyche, which may then be recognized and known for what they are. As Joseph Collingwood has written, "the secrets the poet utters are not his own, but those of his people."

But the case for poetry is not simply that it refines sensibility or provides material for personal enrichment. Far more important, it teaches us as individuals and as members of a community how to gather up the discordant elements of the past. In addition to poetry's ability to "create," in a sense, the coming culture in which people will live, it also apprehends certain values in such a way that they may become actual experiences for the reader or hearer. Poetry provides an image of these values as they resonate in the actions of human beings. It provides an indirect but powerful knowledge-

A poem written in midcentury, Donald Davidson’s “The Case of Motorman 17 depicts the plight of poetry in an unbelieving age. Drawing upon Aeschylus’ Oresteia, Davidson depicts the return of the Furies. These terrifying ladies are seen only by Motorman 17, the operator of a streetcar in a downtown city; he first sees burned places on: the floor, then catches glimpses of the dark shapes themselves. He tries to tell people about his experience and winds up in a courtroom, facing an alienation process. The psychiatrist says without doubt that he is crazy and should be confined; the lawyer, the minister . . . only the poet believes him. So the poet and the ordinary, uneducated member of the folk are the only ones in whom sufficient belief resides to pick up the unearthly signs of the eternal laws. Every other institution is blinded by the eyes of literalism. But the poem ends with hope that poetry is not really dead:

But if Orpheus bleed/ His singing head
Will come again/ To redeem man
Unless the world  be dead.”

And yet, within this general mode, I would say, there are genuine signs of the new culture, hidden within Postmodernism:
Many of the above devices, attitudes and techniques, but viewed within a larger cosmos:
"magical realism"
fabulation, imagination, fantasy with supreme concreteness
[anthropology] myth, ritual, communal life
[feminism] attention to the matriarchal
[Bakhtin] carnival, comedy, polyphony
[psychology] soul making; return to the chthonic; de-emphasis of consciousness
[Marxism] social importance of literature, community
[science] chaos theory; uncertainty principle, field theory
[emerging countries] myth, ritual, many levels of explanation, ambivalent interpretations
awareness that the "constructed meaning," being myth, or the work of the communal imagination, gets at truth better than history does
turn away from the "myth of fact"
the incorporation of lyric into the novel
affirmation and exuberance rather than negation and despair
less pure intellectual display than a celebration of the body
the incorporation of suffering into a positive frame
the grotesque, uncanny
a lyrical musicality
a movement toward transcendence

The path for the lyric in our time seems to be the path of dispossession, of poets relinquishing everything except the imagination, of starting over, in order to affirm. Robert Hayden, Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney, and the other "dispossessed" poets (name some more) all find themselves in the difficult position of having no hope and yet of being able to sing. "How can we sing the Lord's songs in a strange land," they ask. And their poetry points the way for the poets of many displaced cultures to find their lyric voices.

They speak of stripping themselves of what Toni Morrison has called "the master narrative." Seamus Heaney joins his Irish heritage to that of the dispossessed of the earth and can speak of the redress of poetry.
In a sense all lyric poets are dispossessed; they are banished, like the rest of us, from the garden. They may write of Eden, but they do not possess it. They find glimpses of it in moments of joy or pain (such as hearing the nightingale sing in a dark wood or lying beside one's beloved and cajoling her into not weeping at one's absence. The general consciousness that we share, however, inhabits the territory of a new myth, one that we cannot as yet discern. But detached and dissident voices in the lyric are more likely to apprehend what is ahead for us than those that try any further to retrieve or reanimate the old. CONCLUSION NEEDED

[Continue with the "redress of poetry"]